

Chapter Eleven

The Stone of Anger at God

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” ~ Psalm 22:1

“The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart and fancy Him all brain like a watch.” ~ Herman Melville

Now we will look at the largest stone in the wall between my heart and God’s heart, a stone found in the hearts of masses of Christians and non-Christians alike—the stone of anger at God.

We read and hear about God’s goodness and love. Yet we get sick. We lose our jobs. People we love die. Children in our cities take guns to school and kill their classmates and teachers. And Muslim extremists spread terror. Facing the evils of random brutality and inevitable death, our hearts revolt: either there is no God, or he does not care.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I refuse to believe in a God who would allow...the holocaust/sexual abuse/the Rwandan genocide/my dad to die...”? I suspect anger at God over evil and suffering fuels, at some level, the thought-process of every modern person who rejects God. And, as my story will show, this anger can remain firmly planted in the heart of a Christian as well.

The problem is Christians sometimes hide this stone. Unlike those who openly reject God, we revere him. We can be reluctant to admit, even to ourselves, if we are angry at him. We might push our anger down and away, never acknowledging we are angry at him; we may not even know we are. But we cannot get close to him. Our anger—a large, unacknowledged stone—divides our heart from God’s.

Before God helped me identify and tear down the stone of anger, I did not think I was angry with him. I just could not believe he loved me, and I lived in almost constant fear of bad things happening to me or those I loved.

My Aunt Nora and My Cousin Lauren

I’ve already talked a bit about my aunt and cousin. When I was thirteen my aunt Nora and my cousin Lauren fled the abuse of my uncle John and came to live with my family in Washington State for several months. Nora had a vivacious spirit. She rocked our old piano with ragtime music and filled our house with laughter.

My mom (her older sister) and my dad spent those months strengthening Nora’s resolve to leave her destructive marriage. Nora returned to California determined to restart her life independent of John. Less than a week later, I got off the school bus on a warm spring afternoon, walked across the greening grass, and opened the door to our living room. I found my nine-year-old sister Heather huddled in a chair in front of the television. She looked at me with wide, frightened eyes.

“John killed Nora and Lauren,” she said.

I sat down in the other chair and stared in silence at the television while the canned laughter of a sitcom rolled in waves over us.

My mom had already flown to California to keep vigil with her family as they waited in fear, hoping the police would catch John. She returned a week or so later, with no news of my uncle, but she brought a stack of newspaper articles about the murders. I had never heard the word “bludgeoned” before, but I read it over and over in the articles describing how he had beaten them to death. I also learned he had written profanities on the walls of his home with their blood.

My family reeled in shock and grief. A few weeks later, we got in our boat and travelled north to Alaska for another summer of salmon fishing. Then one evening the VHS radio crackled and a coast guard officer informed us we had a call from a landline in California. I heard my grandma’s voice, small and thin, speaking to my mom. “They found John.”

“What?” my mom asked.

The radio crackled, and her voice said again, “They found John.”

My mom couldn’t take it in.

“Mom, they found John,” I said loudly.

I saw her lean on the dash for support. My grandma told her investigators found John’s decomposing body in his car at the bottom of a cliff. Apparently he had raced over the edge not long after the murders.

Twenty-Five Years Later

I was thirty-eight years old, living in Colorado with my husband, Doug—a pastor—and our three children. I had lived as a committed Christian since I was eighteen. But on a date one night, I admitted to Doug I had no confidence God would take me to heaven. “I am afraid,” I said, “when I face him at the end, he will throw me out.”

“You. Are. Kidding. Me,” he responded.

“No, I am not!” I confessed with pain in my heart.

And, as I have said, I had many other fears as well. I did not feel safe from any imaginable tragedy. Why in the world would I think it wouldn’t happen to me?

I did not think of fear as unreasonable. After all, God never promises to protect us from all harm. But not long after this conversation with my husband, I thought I heard the Spirit of God whispering to me, “What would it be like to live without one single fear?” I felt as if he led me up to the top of my dark tower of fear to look on a world of sunshine and beauty and said, “Wouldn’t you rather live out there?”

I did. I wanted to be free of fear, and I grew in the conviction that my fear was not right because the Lord promises me his protection and love. I began to ask him to tear down my stronghold of fear and let me know his love.

One evening a few weeks later I lay in bed almost asleep when a particularly painful bout of fear gripped me. I began to pray quietly, commanding the enemy to leave me alone. Doug heard me and said, “Let’s pray right now.”

We sat up and he prayed, commanding any spirit of fear attached to me to leave. All of a sudden I began to sob, mourning the murders of my aunt and cousin. A spirit of fear must have acted like a cork in a bottle, damming up my grief. The spirit left, and my grief flowed out. I cried for a long time.

Then Doug startled me by quietly asking if I needed to forgive God. My mind rebelled because I had never been aware of being angry at God, and I certainly did not think anyone could “forgive” God. But my heart stepped forward, and I realized in a flash I felt deeply angry at God. He had not protected my aunt, a Christian, or her daughter, from a brutal and gruesome death. Though I had never acknowledged it, even to myself, I held this against him.

I wept harder. My true heart and God finally met. I confessed to him my anger at him. I sensed Jesus showing me a picture of my aunt and cousin in heaven with him—healthy, whole, and happy. I felt him saying to me, “See? They are well. They would not change a thing because of their joy.”

And then Jesus asked me, “Are we okay, you and me?”

I weep even writing this because I still cannot fathom the respect and tenderness of him asking me that question: “Are we okay?”

Jesus asks me? Jesus, with profound respect for my fear and pain, wants to know if I will make peace with him? I can only think of the words of David who cried out, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it” (Psalm 139:6).

I want to be clear. He did not apologize to me. He simply wanted to know if, in light of Nora and Lauren’s joy in heaven and the fact they do not regret their early deaths, I would lay down my anger toward him? Would I trust him?

“Yes,” I wept. “Yes, forgive me for my anger at you. I give it up. We are okay.”

Since the prayer time had taken such an unexpected turn, I did not believe we had finished praying to free me from fear. But I felt depleted and tired, and thinking we would pray more in the days to come, I lay down to sleep.

The Lord had something else in mind.

Moments later, a powerful awareness of his presence in my room startled me completely awake. I felt him standing near my bed, and in astonishment I sensed his exuberant delight. Somehow he poured his love into me—a joyous, cleansing, jubilant love—that filled me with gladness and drove out every single fear. I wept and laughed all at once. Heart-to-heart with Jesus I discovered he loves me—ardently. In wonder, gratitude, and humility, I marveled to discover Jesus desires me near him, longs for me, rejoices over me, and treasures me.

He took me in my memory to the house where Nora and Lauren died, and he met me there, freeing me from invisible chains that held me and embracing me. Then he carried me away and painted pictures in my mind of him and me together in a mountain meadow, dancing, celebrating, and sitting close. He streamed verses about his love into my mind: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3) and “Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away” (Song of Songs 2:10).

Doug, trying to sleep next to me, became concerned because I was shaking with laughter and tears. “Are you okay?”

“The Lord won’t let me sleep,” I laughed with joy. “He’s too excited.”

I understood in that moment that my anger at God, an anger I had not even admitted I harbored, had kept him at arm’s length most of my life. He did not let me sleep because of his joy. The wall had finally come down and his love could reach me. I sensed he didn’t want to wait another minute.

The next morning I sat with the Lord and experienced again his delight in me as his Spirit directed me to scripture after scripture affirming his love for me. I felt reborn. Later my kids saw my delighted face. “Mommy’s in love with Jesus,” my daughter sang from her perch on the swing. Though I had been a Christian for thirty-two years, I felt so changed that it seemed, as I explained in chapter one, I had never understood the Christian life until that day.

At the root of all my fears was my fear God did not love me. A spirit of fear used the trauma of my accident, compounded by my aunt’s murder, to lie to me about God’s loving nature and convince me I was unlovable. When I couldn’t trust God’s love for me, everything was terrifying.

Five stones came down that night: the stone of my mask, a stone of demonic oppression, a stone of lies, a stone of anger at God, and a stone of unhealed memories. The stones came down. His love reached my heart. And fear went away, just as he promises: “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

My new perspective did not mean I believed bad things would never happen to me. It just meant I knew—finally—he loved me. Knowing this, I had courage to face whatever might come. I didn’t feel afraid.

I experienced this healing seven years ago. Since then, I have not lived in a rapturous state. I live what feels like a pretty normal life, with ups and downs, worries and troubles, like most everyone else I know. But since that day I do not doubt God loves me. Sometimes I have to work a little to remind myself, but I can remember he loves me. I can trust I belong to him and he will not throw me out when we meet at the end of my life on earth. I can trust he saves me from my sin through the sacrifice of his Son because he loves me. I treasure this wondrous gift of healing and do not take for granted that I can know God’s love. I wrote this book because I want you to know it too.

The Constructive Power of Honesty

The Bible holds the prayers and cries of many who were angry and perplexed with God. Their honesty might shock modern readers:

- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1).
- “O Lord, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you.... You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.... Why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:1, 6-7, 14).
- “O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived” (Jeremiah 20:7).
- “I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound

incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (Jeremiah 15:17-18).

These biblical writers poured out to God their questions, fear, anguish, and rage. They did not “curse God” as Job’s wife commanded Job to do (Job 2:9), but they were authentic and transparent. They valued their relationship with God enough to be honest with him.

I don’t like conflict. When I was a young woman, I couldn’t have a conflictual conversation with anyone. I avoided hard topics, or I hid my face in my hands and cried during tough conversations I couldn’t escape. But slowly I learned I did damage to my relationships when I had hard feelings toward someone and chose not to have a difficult conversation with them. By avoiding conflict, I took control of the relationship and chose to allow distance to grow between us. Contrary to my instincts, when we respectfully enter into an uncomfortable conversation, we choose the path toward sustaining and even growing the intimacy of any relationship.

The same is true in our relationship with God. If we deny our anger at him, or fail to talk to him about it, we put stones between his heart and ours. We choose a superficial relationship with him. To pursue closeness with him, we must bring him our anger and ask him our hard questions and wait for him to respond. In this way, we demonstrate we value our intimacy with him and trust him to care, listen, and respond.

A friend of mine did this when her fourteen-year-old son accidentally hanged himself in her basement. She raged at God one afternoon while she cleaned out her son’s closet. “How could you take my son?” she cried.

She heard God say, “Would you rather I had never given him to you?”

My friend’s grief changed at that point. She did not get the answer she wanted, but God’s response altered her perspective. She saw the fourteen years she did get with her son as a gift. I have heard her say—though she would never go back to those dark years of her early grief—she sometimes longs for the closeness she felt to God then.

Anger blocked my intimacy with God for a long and painful time while he waited for me to bring my true heart to him. As long as I denied my anger, I put on a mask. When I got honest, his response—showing me the heaven-life of my aunt and cousin—helped me “forgive him.” The wall came down between him and me.

Since God has never done anything wrong, we cannot forgive him like we forgive someone who has sinned against us. But to make peace with God we must lay down our anger, just as we do when we forgive a person. He will help us do this if we will get real. The spiritual exercises at the end of this chapter will lead you in this process.

Two Gifts and a Bracing Promise

When we suffer, our hearts cry why? Why did my marriage end? Why did my child die? Why did my race suffer genocide? Why did God allow this?

We are not alone in asking this—the most painful question of the human heart. Many people in the Bible cried, “Why?” Jesus himself cried out, moments before his death: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

No one in the Bible gets an answer to this question. Maybe the answers exceed our capacity to understand. But the longer I sit with Jesus’s terrible words, the more I sense the mysterious, unyielding joy of two gifts from God resounding under their despair.

The trajectory of Jesus’s incarnation leads him down through every form of human suffering. He moves down from heaven’s glory to the shameful poverty of childbirth in a barn, down from blinding beauty into a human body Isaiah tells us was not good looking. His life leads him down through political oppression, down through misinterpretation, rejection, betrayal, and abandonment, down through false accusations, arrest, and torture. Down, down, down, to this—the most excruciating moment—the agony of feeling abandoned by God.

Because of this trajectory, and because of this moment in particular, no matter the depth of our suffering, we have the gift of knowing we are not alone. Jesus shares our pain. He is Emmanuel, God with us, down to the last drop of agony life can wring from us. And his solidarity with us in suffering did not stop with his crucifixion. We get his Holy Spirit, with us EVERY moment: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus’s last words offer us another gift, a gift that shines bright hope into our despair: Jesus felt forsaken, but he was not forsaken. How do we know? Three days later, Jesus rose. Though Jesus felt forsaken in that hour, God’s good purposes for Jesus were not threatened for a moment. Joy awaited Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). One day he would see what his death had accomplished and be more than satisfied (Isaiah 53:11). God was working in the dark.

Because Jesus uttered those words and then rose, his pain-filled question gives us the gift of hope. If we belong to God, nothing—not death, illness, genocide, famine, war, divorce, abuse, rejection—nothing we experience can mean God has abandoned us. From Jesus we learn our cry, “Why have you forsaken me?” though we utter it with our dying breath, is not the last word. No matter how bad it gets, God is not finished writing a story for us that will have the best ending: heaven and endless joy-filled life lie ahead.

From the perspective of heaven, our agonies—no matter how great—are “momentary” (2 Corinthians 4:17). We will join Jesus where “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Revelation 21:4).

So we get two gifts: the gift of Jesus’s solidarity with us in our pain and the gift of hope. We also get a bracing promise: God will come to judge the earth:

The day of Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed...according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:10, 13).

Hebrews 2:8 says “at present we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” Though God remains ultimately in control, things here on earth are not the way he wants them. One day he will end the present structures of life. He will expose and destroy all that hurts us, and he will bring everything into

subjection to himself. When that happens, “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

God’s coming judgement affirms our inner revulsion over genocide, sex trafficking, famine, disease, and tragic death. We are right. In fact, our puny rage cannot compare to what God will one day pour out on this place. I find this a bracing comfort.

So we don’t get answers. We get affirmation of our inner revolt. We get him with us now—loving us. And in the end we get him face-to-face forever in a place where all suffering will end.

And he wants to know, “Are we okay, you and me?”

Brown, Jasona. Stone by Stone: Tear Down the Wall Between God's Heart and Yours , WhiteFire Publishing. Kindle Edition.