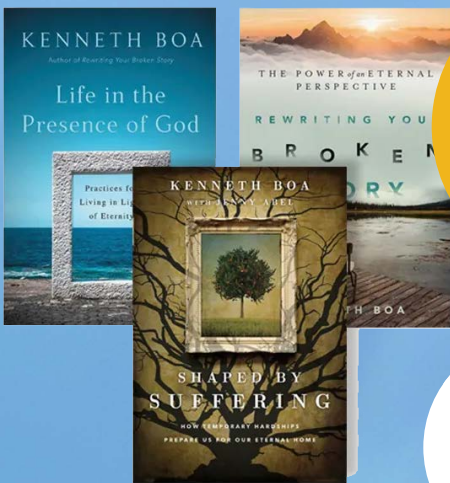


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THE POWER OF PAIN

“Thank God for prison!” This puzzling sentiment of words flowed from the pen of the man many believe to be the twentieth century’s dominant literary figure, the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Growing up as a committed atheist and communist, Solzhenitsyn reached the level of captain in the Russian army. But his military career came to an abrupt end when he was shipped off to a labor camp for verbally criticizing the policies of Joseph Stalin, the brutal Russian leader.

In prison, Solzhenitsyn encountered a number of hope-filled religious believers, Russians who clung to the Orthodox Christian faith that had been so pervasive in pre-communist (i.e., pre-1917) Russia. Over time, Solzhenitsyn shifted his allegiance from Karl Marx, who had been revered by his former teachers, to the revolutionary Jesus Christ, who had been worshiped by his ancestors. “God of the Universe!” he wrote. “I believe again! Though I renounced You, You were with me!”

Why would the affliction of a prison labor camp cause an intellectual giant like Solzhenitsyn to turn to God? There can be no certain answer to that question. Every afflicted person who has discovered spiritual clarity in times of pain would have his or her own explanation for why it happened. What is most important to learn from the experience of a person like Solzhenitsyn—or the psalmist of the Old Testament—is that affliction can be a powerful force for good in our lives.

In just three verses, the psalmist says that affliction caused him to turn back from

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going astray, to learn the meaning of God’s decrees, and to see God’s righteousness. Why? Only the psalmist himself could explain why. But the lesson for all is found in the power of pain to heal.

Afflictions are tailor-made for individuals: another’s pain might mean little to you. So rather than trying to ignore or prevent your own personal pain, learn the lessons it brings; let it become your teacher. In the season of sorrow, the fruit you bear may be sweeter than in any other.

God’s Promise:
God’s best for you can appear to be the worst for you.

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REFLECTIONS

A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart



THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Father God, I thank You that Your gift of eternity begins in this life with the reception of the righteousness of Your Son through faith. In Christ, my alienation and estrangement with You due to my sin is overcome and replaced by the gift of justification and of peace with You. Through my redemption and adoption into Your spiritual family, I have received the great blessing of Your presence and of fellowship with You. As the triune God, You Yourself are a relational community of three Persons. This profound mystery is the basis for all relationships, because it takes more than one person for there to be love and communion. In Christ, You have welcomed me into this fellowship, and the greatest glory of heaven will be to be with You in Your unmediated presence, beholding Your boundless beauty and majesty and enjoying You with others.

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Resting In Our Identity In Christ

The Central Question of Our Day

One of the central questions of our day is, What does it mean to be human? It's a profound question, but it's also a sign of deep confusion. If we came across a group of construction workers staring in bewilderment at all of their machinery and equipment, we would conclude that some profound confusion had set in. Similarly, what are we to make of the fact that we routinely gather together as humans to raise the question of what it means to be human? Shouldn't we be able to take for granted that we're human? We also tend to ask this question during times of crisis. In the context of chattel slavery, for instance, the question of personhood came to the forefront with great urgency. Today, we're asking it from a place of spiritual anguish. Having pushed God to the margins, people now drift into the assumption that their identity is their own responsibility. Though the prospect of defining who we are on our own terms may initially seem liberating, it soon becomes an oppressive burden. Not only do we have to define ourselves; we have to try and justify our own existence.

The God-Given Nature of Our Most Important Desires

Ken Boa identifies three groups of God-given needs common to all human beings: love and acceptance, significance and identity, and competence and fulfillment.¹ All of these are natural, innate desires common to all human beings. The distinction is important. Desires for sports cars and super powers, intense as they may be, are neither natural nor innate. Rather, they are acquired. No one is born wanting a Lamborghini, but everyone is born wanting love, food, and rest. We can also add a further qualification. Though maturity refines our desires—an infant isn't able to desire identity and significance yet—we can acknowledge that, while we may want a Lamborghini and the ability to fly, we *need* love and acceptance. Indeed, we perish without them. Why is this so significant? Because our most important desires are given—not self-created. Here we have a powerful clue about why a life devoted to nothing more than self-fulfillment on our own terms is a recipe for loneliness, frustration, and despair. With this in mind, let's turn to each set of desires, consider our culture's answer to them, and then turn to the stability offered by Christ in the matter.

Love and Acceptance

We all need unconditional love and acceptance. Unfortunately, if we concentrate only on our human relationships, the best we can hope for is an imperfect response. For many, however, genuine love and acceptance are wholly absent.² To make matters worse, the culture sends mixed signals when it comes to love and acceptance. On the one hand, we

are told to demand unconditional acceptance from others, so much so that anyone who takes exception to our lifestyle choices may be labeled as “negative,” “toxic,” or even “oppressive.” This me-without-compromise mindset is hardly conducive to lasting relationships, all of which require a willingness to disagree, compromise, and change. After all, if we're all sinners, we all have areas in our lives that require renovation and change. But on the other hand, popular culture continues to promote an impossible standard that leads many in frantic pursuit of an ideal of beauty that shows up on our screens and in our magazines. In essence, the cultural answer to the need for love and acceptance is, “Be yourself, but make sure you meet our standards when you do it!” When it comes to the need for unconditional love and acceptance, beauty and glamor are the substitutes offered by our culture.

Significance and Identity

Another basic need we all share is for “identification with someone or something greater than ourselves.”³ The culture's answer to this need is the pursuit of status. You may not be able to fly like Superman, but you can certainly fly down the interstate in a sports car, or reach your next destination in a private jet. It's in this sense that celebrities function as a kind of royalty in American culture. These “icons” stand as paragons of success and their wealth, power, and influence are seen as forms of profound validation. Here, it's worth highlighting two major points of tension in the status answer. Firstly, the kind of status that's valorized in our culture is available only to a select few. The expectation that all of us ought to be able to achieve that level of fame, fortune, and influence is far from reasonable. Secondly, we have overwhelming evidence that the very peaks of earthly attainment don't provide lasting fulfillment. From Tom Brady to Mick Jagger, many recent celebrities are on record about the lackluster nature of fame and fortune. It's also worth pointing to the fact that even a casual perusal through many celebrity biographies often reveals a life of relentless selfishness where other people were continually sacrificed on the altar of personal ambition. Such ruthless antics call the entire enterprise into question. To the need for significance and identity, our culture offers the meager substitute of status.

Competence and Fulfillment

Finally, we all need to know that our life has somehow made a difference—that we've improved the world in some tangible way, however small. One of the reasons that the status substitute mentioned above fails to deliver on its promises is that it can't guarantee a lasting sense of significance. It's possible to recline by the pool in a Hollywood mansion and sense the utter hollowness of all these attainments. Consequently, many people who achieve high levels of wealth, fame, and fortune go to increasing lengths to quell the sneaking suspicion that none of it means anything. Here, the culture offers up another powerful substitute—namely, performance. Though it's possible to concentrate only on one's career (status again), the more tempting option is to pursue some grand moral cause: justice, saving the planet, political reform. To be sure, these can all be noble pursuits, but they quickly turn into devastating idols if we use them as a means to justify our existence. This is the reason that so many of our moral causes in the wider culture give rise to shrill legalism and acrimony. If moral causes become substitutes for the competence and fulfillment offered by Christ alone,

they are nothing more than elaborate performances that we use to justify ourselves.

Fulfillment in Christ Alone

As tempting as all of these cultural substitutes are, all of them fail to deliver on their promises. If Christ is our Maker, He alone can fulfill us. As Boa points out, “we must dare to believe that if everything else is taken away, our God is enough.”⁴ To the cultural injunction to earn love and acceptance through an impossible (and largely cosmetic) standard of beauty, Christianity answers that we find unconditional love and acceptance in Christ Jesus who died for us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). Having surrendered to Him, we are now dead to sin (6:11) and it is no longer we who live but Christ in us (Galatians 2:20). To the cultural substitute of temporal status in place of true identity and significance, Christ confers His status on those who belong to Him: “For our sake He made Him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5:21)” Earthly wealth, fame, and power will pass away, but the love of Christ remains steadfast. Finally, in place of the sycophantic legalism on display in our culture, Christ invites us to rest in His finished work of salvation, so that we are free to love and forgive others as we have been loved and forgiven. In a world frantically asking what it means to be human, God's people must answer by being the hands and feet of Christ.

Notes

1. Ken Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Revised Edition) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 98-99.
2. Ibid., 98.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 104.

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