



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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“The Happy Result of a Bad Experience”

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A review of Gerald L. Sittser. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996. 184 pp.

Gerald Sittser would tell you that the loss he experienced is not really unique, that his loss “is a manifestation of a universal experience . . . as much a part of normal life as birth” (9). At one level, he is correct, for all people face loss at some point. At the same time, his loss is unique (“as all losses are” - 9), not merely because every loss is unique, but also because few have the ability Sittser does to tell their story and relate it to some of humanity’s greatest questions.

In the fall of 1991, Sittser’s family took a home school education trip to complete a unit of study on Native American culture by attending a powwow at a reservation in Idaho. In addition to his wife of nearly twenty years and their four children, ages two to eight, Sittser was accompanied by his mother. Shortly after leaving the powwow, their minivan was involved in a head-on collision with a car allegedly driven by a drunk driver, whose pregnant wife was killed in the accident. Sittser’s wife, Lynda, mother, Grace, and four-year-old daughter, Diana Jane, were killed. “Three generations – gone in an instant!” (19). Written three years after the accident, *A Grace Disguised* is Sittser’s meditation on this staggering loss. As a survivor, he explores with candor the feelings, confusion and process of grief he experienced. But he also writes as a trained theologian (M. Div., Fuller Theological Seminary) and historian (Ph. D., University of Chicago) who works as an associate professor of religion at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. He is clear that his academic training did not spare him the wrenching agony of his loss.¹

In his Preface, Sittser explains his motivation, purpose, and direction. Here are some key statements.

This book is about catastrophic loss and the transformation that can occur in our lives because of it... It is not . . . the *experience* of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives, . . . It is how we *respond* to loss that matters. . . . I believe that “recovery” from such loss is an unrealistic and even harmful expectation, if by recovery we mean resuming the way we lived and felt prior to the loss. Instead, the

¹ In one passage, he comments, “the issue of God’s sovereignty is no longer a mere abstraction to me either. I chose to become a professor because I *wanted* to think about big questions like this one, which have always fascinated me. But after the accident I *had* to think about them, . . .” (138).

book is intended to show how it is possible to live in and be enlarged by the loss, even as we continue to experience it. That's why I will emphasize the power of response. Response involves the *choices* we make, the *grace* we receive, and ultimately the *transformation* we experience in the loss. My aim is not to provide quick and painless solutions, but to point the way to a lifelong journey of growth. . . . If we face loss squarely and respond to it wisely, we will actually become healthier people, even as we draw closer to physical death. . . . Though I offer vignettes of my story throughout these pages, I decided to write a book about the *universal* experience of loss rather than my own particular experience alone. . . . Writing this book has turned out to be meaningful but not cathartic. . . . It is the happy result of a bad experience (9-11).

Though the book is not laid out in sections, one can discern three parts to Sittser's meditation. Part one emphasizes his experience in the months following the accident. Chapter 1 weaves the story of the accident with initial reactions ("My experience was like a dam that broke" - 16) and the realization that suffering must be faced. Chapters 2-7 deal with (1) the impossibility of quantifying and comparing losses, including such losses as divorce, unemployment, sexual abuse and rape (pp. 22-30); (2) the terrible darkness of despair which sets in when one faces loss, darkness which involves the difficulty of prayer, and the realization that the quickest way to reach the light of the sun is to head east into the darkness (pp. 31-43); (3) the pain involved in facing loss, pain that shows a capacity to feel, is worse when what is lost is more cherished, and which is made worse through such resistance techniques as denial, bargaining, indulging appetites, and venting anger (pp. 44-54); (4) the barrenness which comes with loss as sufferers are "suspended between a past for which they long and a future for which they hope" (56; chapter is from 55-68); (5) the loss of identity which comes with loss (Chapter 6 - "The Amputation of the Familiar Self") as the sufferer faces new circumstances so different from what was before (pp. 69-79); and (6) the "Sudden Halt to Business As Usual" (chapter 7), the "darker side of grief [which] forces us to recognize the incompleteness of life and to admit our failures" (84; chapter is from 80-93).

Part two consists of four chapters (8-11) which relate loss to the problem of evil and suffering. Issues in this section are cogently summarized by the chapter titles: "The Terror of Randomness" (94-105); "Why Not Me?" (106-115); "Forgive and Remember" (116-132); and "The Absence of God" (133-145). More will be said below about these chapters.

Part three involves perspective. In four concluding chapters (12-15), Sittser shows the existence of the light for which he was looking when he turned into the darkness (see chapter 3). "Life Has the Final Word" (chapter 12, pp. 146-152) shows the power of the resurrection of Christ for enduring loss: "Death does not have the final word; life does. Jesus' death and resurrection made it possible. . . . What made the disciples so different from the rest of us who have experienced catastrophic loss is not the terrible experience of the loss itself, but their experience of Jesus' resurrection" (150). "A Community of Brokenness" (chapter 13, pp. 153-167) reflects on the value of people turning toward one another in times of loss, experiences which do "not have to isolate us or make us feel lonely, [but] can create a community of brokenness" (154). Sittser is especially effective in pointing out the value of people just being there for others, without the pressure of saying the right thing, e.g., "Trite answers were a poor replacement for compassion" (157). "The Cloud of Witnesses" (chapter 14, pp. 168-174) uses the phrase from Hebrews 12:1 to show how Christian sufferers can draw strength from those both within and outside the Scriptural record who have suffered and emerged victoriously. Closing this chapter with a reference to the heavenly scene in Revelation 21, Sittser writes, "That scene reminds me that heaven is our true destiny, however good

life on earth seems to be. Heaven is our real home, where we have always longed to be" (174). "Heritage in a Graveyard" (chapter 15, pp. 175-181) revolves around the fact that we are all products of the experiences of those who have gone before, including experiences both pleasant and tragic. Sittser notes that, just as he is heir to grandfathers who lost their wives and had to rear their families alone, so what he has experienced will have an impact on others. The experience of loss is part of what shapes who we are and, if used effectively, part of our growth.

The supreme challenge to anyone facing catastrophic loss involves facing the darkness of the loss on the one hand, and learning to live with the renewed vitality and gratitude on the other. This challenge is met when we learn to take the loss into ourselves and to be enlarged by it, so that our capacity to live life well and to know God intimately increases. To escape the loss is far less healthy – and far less realistic, considering how devastating loss can be – than to grow from it (180).

In evaluating *A Grace Disguised* and its value for sufferers of loss and those who help them through it, one should remember that the book is a very personal reflection on a stunningly tragic event. Sittser is telling his story, not writing a theoretical account on the nature and stages of grief or the problem of evil. The book is biblically based and theologically grounded. While one might have preferred more references to Scripture, given the personal nature of the book this preference is a quibble, not a flaw. Likewise, grief theorists might quibble with such statements as Sittser's revelation that he "did not find it helpful . . . nor . . . true in [his] experience to identify these various responses [to his pain] as 'stages' through which [he] had to pass on [his] way to 'recovery'" (50). Again, he is writing as a sufferer, not a theorist. In his experience, he has not found that he has "moved through" the stages, nor is he convinced that he will go through them only once (as he suggests the stage model implies). That does not mean that he is experiencing his grief in an unhealthy way or is not growing through it.

It is the kind of candor seen in his statement about grief stages that is one of the real strengths of *A Grace Disguised*. One is not presented with sugarcoating of real emotions, let alone the sort of "Christian stoicism" some seem to recommend. Sittser candidly relates how the pressure sometimes leads him to "blow up" at his children (77). He admits to some relief in not having to deal any longer with the flaws his wife exhibited – even as he admits to his own failings (83). He relates his anger when the man whom he knows was the driver and therefore responsible for the accident was acquitted of the charges, anger which he found was "edging [him] toward becoming an unforgiving person and using what appeared to be the failure of the judicial system to justify [his] unforgiveness" (119). He is also honest about his questions about God's sovereignty and fairness, the temptation atheism held for him as he suffered, and the fact that he found that "at first the story of Job repulsed me" (100).

It is his candor and exploration of the latter questions that strike this reviewer as the best part of the book. This may be because it explores the subject matter of the course for which this review is written. But beyond that, in chapters 8-11 Sittser shows the practical implications of the questions as they are faced, not by a theodicy theorist, but by an informed Bible student seeking God in the midst of pain. So, he looked straight into "The Terror of the Randomness" (chapter 8), wondering why his family was "at just that place, at just that time, under just those circumstances" (95). He confronted the blame he focused on himself and tells how he wished for the power to alter that day's events. But, upon being challenged by his brother-in-law, one of the pivotal members of his "community of

brokenness," he realized that a better alternative to trying to play God was to surrender control and live in hope.

He also looked straight at the question "why me?" and realized that the better question is, "Why Not Me?" (chapter 9). Especially valuable in this chapter is his reflection on how blessed he was and is to live in a land of relative ease and comfort when compared to such things as the loss of life in the Soviet Union before and during World War II, the Black Death in Europe in the fourteenth century, and deprived conditions currently endured by millions of people in the Third World (109). He did not believe that the accident was something he deserved, but he found his experience valuable for checking the "assumption that [he] had a right to complete fairness" (111). He also learned lessons of forgiveness through his ordeal, lessons that moved him away from bitterness to an attitude nearer to the heart of God (chapter 10, "Forgive and Remember").

All this leads to the account of his struggle with the apparent absence of God (chapter 11). His questions were related to the intellectual questions of Darwin, Freud, Feuerbach and other Western thinkers, but they were different in that they were "*emotional* questions about God." He found that "suffering does not allow us the luxury of keeping the question at a safe distance" (137). So, he explored it as a fellow sufferer seeking to know why things that are genuinely bad do in fact occur. This led him to a different understanding of God's sovereignty. Whereas his previous view had been more deterministic in nature, his suffering led him to the conclusion that he "can affirm God's sovereignty and still be a person instead of a puppet," a view which left him with what he believed to be an enlarged view of God's sovereignty (141). He also came to see "the peculiar relationship that exists between God's sovereignty and the Incarnation" (142). He sees a suffering God in the work of Jesus. As the result, he is more sensitive to Jesus' suffering, having "cried at every communion service" he had attended for the three years following the accident until the book was written (143). Finally, he emerged with a different perspective on faith. "The point is that we have a *choice*. More than anything, God covets our love. But real love can never be forced" (143). Thus, faith is essential, for God will not overwhelm and thus coerce us.

A Grace Disguised is probably not a book that should be given indiscriminately to everyone who has suffered loss. Some may not be ready for its candor. Others may not have reflected enough on the theological issues to appreciate the depth behind Sittser's reflections and conclusions. But it is a book which will be a valuable resource for many who suffer, and should be part of the reading list of any who counsel and console those who suffer. Though each person's loss is unique, Sittser's reflections give insight into what those who suffer experience. Though not exhaustive, his reflections on the philosophical and theological questions are well grounded and have the advantage of being worked out in the crucible of emotional pain. He has experienced the pain and emerged with hope. He has something to teach the rest of us for whom the suffering of loss has either occurred or is inevitable.

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Addendum

As indicated above, the preceding review was written in the spring of 2001. My wife, Carlynn, passed away from cancer in 2017, just two and half months after we received her diagnosis. Before preparing this review for posting—or even reading it again—I took the time to re-read and reflect upon *A Grace Disguised*.

I did so because I wanted to see how well my review stood up nineteen years after it was written. By that I don't mean that I was mainly concerned about style, phrasing, and so forth. Rather, I wanted to evaluate my review in light of my own experience of loss, grief, and reflection.

Because I highlight and make notes in my books, as I read I was able to see what had especially caught my attention when I read *A Grace Disguised* the first time. While certainly possible that my eyes were drawn to those things this time by the colored highlighting I did then, I found that, had they not already been highlighted, I would have highlighted most of the same passages this time through. I also found that some of the highlighted passages stuck me in ways that would not have been possible before Carlynn's death.

As you might expect, I also took note of and highlighted other things that I didn't mark nineteen years ago. Some of that, of course, is attributable to the fact that we nearly always notice something different when we re-read a piece of writing. But many of the new highlights—and again, I suspect you would anticipate this—were things that struck me precisely because I now share the experience of being unexpectedly widowed that formed the context for Sittser's book.

(I'll briefly note just two specific examples. (1) Sittser's comments on the grief stages on page 50—see the paragraph on page 3 above that begins, "In evaluating *A Grace Disguised* . . ." (2) This statement from page 62: "Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery." Based on my experience, and conversations I've had over the last two-plus years with others who have experienced loss, I would broaden the last sentence to include *all* loss, not just catastrophic loss.)

Sittser's grief and mine are similar, but not the same. Such is the nature of loss. But in the main, I find that what I wrote by way of review two decades ago has held up over time. I hope my review is helpful. But more importantly, I hope that it might serve as an encouragement to other sufferers—as well as to those who minister to them—to take the time to read and reflect upon Sittser's book.

It will be time and effort well spent.

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