

SUFFERING

HOW TRAUMA DESTROYS AND CHRIST RESTORES

AND THE

HEART OF

GOD

DIANE LANGBERG

Suffering and the Heart of God:

How Trauma Destroys
and Christ Restores

DIANE LANGBERG



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Introduction

This book is borne out of forty years of listening to suffering and traumatized people. It has been a school; a discipline in many ways and I have learned much. Clients have come to me for help—with histories of abuse, violence, trafficking, and torture. They have been deeply shaped by those events and most come longing to be shaped differently. It has been my work to listen, to understand, to read, and to study diligently so that I do indeed help and not harm the already wounded.

However, I have come to see that in addition to coming to me for help they have been sent by God to help shape me. The years of absorbing evil, of deepening compassion, and boldness in truth have refined my life and my soul. The Redeemer has been in the room pursuing and changing shattered lives. That Redeemer has also been in the room continually working his likeness more deeply in me.

It is my hope that the words of this book, many of them originally talks given to God's caregivers around the world, will strengthen you in the caregiving you do. I would want you to gain knowledge of some of the great evils done to others and how those evils deeply alter lives so that a few true words will not simply make things right. I hope you will, as I have, grow in humility, losing the certainty that you know the answer and the way or conversely, that no study or expertise is necessary when caring for

broken lives. We need the humility to enter in and sit with those who struggle—as our incarnated Lord did—and the wisdom to know when we are out of our depth and need to call in others with greater knowledge and experience so as not to trample fragile humans already trampled by others. To this end, the book is divided into sections—the first two designed for anyone who wants to learn to enter into the pain of others and the last two for clinicians who provide more specialized care.

Yet even as the book increases knowledge and calls forth humility, it is my deepest hope that the suffering of others will open your eyes to the Suffering Servant who came in the flesh to explain the Father to lost and trampled humans and who, as you care for others, longs to teach you more about who he is and how he desires to transform your heart and life so that you bear the fragrance of Christ wherever you go. He bore every bit of ruin you will ever face in a life; even yours. Seek him in those ruined places—others' and your own. And as you seek him seeking you, you will find the Lamb who bore all the evil you will ever encounter. Look for his face in the ruined lives that sit before you and he will transform you into his likeness—so that those ruined creatures you counsel will look into your ruined face and see the Lamb of God.

SUFFERING, THE WORLD,
AND THE HEART OF GOD

CHAPTER I

Trauma as a Place of Service

It is a numbing world. The digital world and media tsunami overwhelm us and we can often barely take in sound bites. For now, however, I would ask you to marshal the forces of your mind and heart and come with me for a glimpse of the world our God so loves, the world whose anguish he bears. He has asked us to look with him—to step away from the numbing and listen to *his* heart and *his* thoughts. So come, listen and see with me a small piece of the heart of our God for this fearful, fallen world.

While I was in Ghana a couple of years ago for a conference on violence against women and children, we visited Cape Coast Castle. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced through its dungeons and through the door of no return onto slave ships. There were five dungeon chambers for males, and descending into the darkness to one of those dungeons felt claustrophobic. Two hundred men shackled and chained together lived in that dungeon for about three months before being shipped across the Atlantic.

We stood in one of the male dungeons listening in the darkness to the whole horrific story when our guide said this: “Do you know what is above this dungeon?” Our heads shook. The chapel. Directly above two hundred shackled men—some of them dead, others screaming, all of them sitting in filth—sat God worshippers. They sang, they read the Scripture, they prayed, and I suppose took up an offering for those less fortunate. The slaves

could hear the service, and the worshipers could sometimes hear the slaves (though there were those making them behave so as not to disturb church). It took my breath away. The evil, the suffering, the humiliations, the injustice were overwhelming, and the visual parable was stunning. The people in the chapel were numb to the horrific trauma and suffering beneath them.

We have dungeons in our world today too: Tent cities in Haiti and Ivory Coast; genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur; wars around the world; and relentless, systemic violence in our own inner cities. Do you know that all of these events produce traumatized human beings? One in four soldiers is a child, and 200 million children live on the streets of this world. Amnesty International says one in three females are beaten or coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetime. One in three. Think about that statistic next time you walk through an airport or a city street, or sit in the pews in your own church. Child sexual abuse, child marriage, and female genital mutilation cause physical and psychological harm to countless females. Girls have acid thrown in their faces for attending school; they are stoned to death for being raped. Eastern Congo is the rape capital of the world. A recent UN human rights panel says that hundreds of thousands have been raped during the conflict there and 13 percent of the victims are children under the age of ten. Sex trafficking, the slavery of today, is a brutal and large-scale destructive force of girls and women today. And it is not just over there; it is here in our own streets and cities, in *your* city. The dungeons are here, sometimes sitting next to us.

All of these things from tent cities to abuse, things we find difficult to comprehend or hold in our minds, are endured by human beings one at a time. They result in traumatized human beings. Trauma means living with the recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne. Memories that infect victims' sleep with horrific nightmares, destroy their relationships or their capacity to work or study, torment their emotions, shatter their faith,

and mutilate hope. Trauma is extraordinary, you see, not because it rarely happens but because it swallows up and destroys normal human ways of living. The dungeons of this world are filled with traumatized people.

As it was in Cape Coast Castle, the usual response to atrocity is to try to remove it from the mind. Those who have been traumatized want to flee the memory of its occurrence, and we who hear find that we want to flee also. We find it too terrible to remember and too incomprehensible to put into words. That is why we use the phrase *unspeakable atrocities*. The great tension is the futile attempt to forget the unspeakable, though it continues to live on and scream in the mind. That push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma, and that tension is not only experienced by individuals and families, but also by institutions and nations. It is experienced not only by the traumatized but also by those who bear witness to the trauma.

I know something of this tension because as a psychologist I have worked for forty years with sexual abuse, rape, and domestic violence as well as combat trauma, genocide, and trafficking. I have looked into traumatized eyes all around the world. I have seen this push-pull in my clients who are terrified to remember and speak, but who cannot forget. I have witnessed families, churches, and yes, nations deny the existence of evil, abuse, and trauma in their midst.

I also know this tension exists in those who bear witness, for it resides in me. You know, we see an atrocity on television or the internet, and soon after we look for ways to remove ourselves. Such stories threaten our comfort, our position, or our system. The stories are vile and messy and very disruptive. Traumatized people need attention and assistance, often for a long time. The trauma stories of our own families, institutions, and organizations get buried, and geographical distance and the push of a button enable us to do the same with entire nations. Ask Rwanda. We are in fact quite like the chapel-goers in the fort in Ghana.

So what are we to do? Choose complicity by turning away in silence? Flit from cause to cause trying to do something (which is sometimes about making ourselves feel better or feeding some voyeuristic need)? Render judgment and categorize the traumatized and suffering as *they*? You know, if *they* were more responsible and made better choices, then *they* would not be suffering.

Under the form of worship in that chapel in Ghana lay the darkness of slavery, oppression, and tyranny—all things that blight and destroy humans created in the image of God. But I think you know Christianity does *not* look like being folded up with evil and worshiping on top of dungeons. Following Christ *does not* look like complicity with a system that butters our bread and fills our coffers but is built on the backs of those created in the image of God. It does not look like praying and singing and giving money on top of screams, unspeakable suffering, filth, and death. Christianity is not calling others *them*—somehow unlike us, not human, deserving of their suffering. Our guide pointed up to the church above and said, “Heaven above; hell below.” But I would argue that heaven was *not* above, for that is not what heaven does.

What does heaven do? Heaven leaves heaven—its place of comfort, songs, purity, plenty, and money to give. Heaven comes down. If the people of that chapel had truly worshiped God, they would have been in the dungeon, in the filth and the darkness and the suffering. They would have entered in *so that they might bring out*. Acts 17:6 says, “These men have turned the world upside down” (ESV). The church goes into the dungeon so that the dungeon becomes the church. God came down so as to lift up. God became like us so that we might become like him. He came to this dung-filled dungeon we call earth and sat with us, touched us, loved us, and called us to him.

He also enters the dungeons of our hearts and transforms them. He did not treat us as *them* but became one of us so that we might be his. God is power becoming little, coming down to embrace what is alien. There is no *them*; there is only us. We were the

slaves in the dungeon, and he has *not* taken us out so we can stand on the heads of the oppressed and say we worship him for not leaving us there with them. He has called us as his body to follow our head, to go back into the plague-infested dung heap so other slaves might find freedom and go back with us to find yet more.

When our God interfaces with this world, he leaves the higher and descends. He leaves beauty and enters chaos; he leaves pure and goes into filthy. And he demonstrates that our God does not just speak words *but also acts*—*first* in the heart dungeons of human beings *and then* through the lives of those same people into the dungeons of this world. Jesus demonstrated in the flesh the character of God; his church is to do the same for the world. When God's people worship over and separate, untouched by dungeons, they are *not* worshiping the God of the Scriptures. There is *nothing* in the Scriptures to suggest that being complicit, neutral, or uncaring and deaf to the cries of humans is godly. Those Scriptures *do* say that the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle were below *because* they were *first present* in the hearts of the worshippers.

Sadly, the body of Christ has often failed to see trauma as a place of service. If we survey the extensive natural disasters in our time—earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis—and combine those victims with the human atrocities—the violent inner cities, wars, genocides, trafficking, rapes, and child abuse—we would have a staggering number. I think a look at suffering humanity would lead to the realization that trauma is perhaps the greatest mission field of the twenty-first century.

The people of God have sometimes hidden in chapels, worshiping, singing, giving money, and sticking our heads out to tell others what they were doing wrong. We have often blamed those who suffer for their trauma. We have failed to recognize that systems can be corrupt and power abused and that *like our Lord*, many people in this world suffer from totally undeserved injustice and trauma. We have not gone to the dungeons and have been blind to the fact that such refusal is merely an exposure of the

dungeons of our hearts—hearts *not* like our God's, whose heart bore the anguish of this world and who entered the dungeons of this fallen world to make all things new.

Many of you see this and want to enter in, and I am glad. You are in places of power and influence, in alleys and brothels. You do not want to hide in the chapel and that is good. But listen, do not be seduced. The chapel is not a place; it is a Person; it is a Head with a body. And as in the physical realm, a body that does not follow its head is a sick body. Many of you see that. It is also true that the dungeon is not a place; it is the human heart. There is no corporate greed without humans; there is no rape and abuse without humans; there are no corrupt systems without people to protect and lie.

Our first call is not to places—be they chapels or dungeons—but to a Person. To love and obedience to Jesus Christ, no matter the cost; to hearts that tolerate no dungeon corner to exist hidden from his light. Many have thought that if you avoid the dungeons of this world, you stay clean. However, to do so is to fail to follow our Savior out onto the dung heaps of this world. Many of you are going—go. But remember this: the dungeon is first in us. That is what has created the dungeons out there. Do not fool yourselves into thinking you follow your Savior where others have failed to do so, all the while hiding dungeons in your own souls, whether it is in pride or pornography.

Given the numbers of suffering and traumatized, let me reiterate that *the trauma of this world is one of the primary mission fields of the twenty-first century*. It is one of the supreme opportunities before the church today. Our Head left glory and came down to this traumatized world. He became flesh like us; he literally got in our skin. He did not numb or flee the atrocities of this world or of our hearts. Will we, his body, also leave our spaces, our chapels and enter the trauma of terrified and shattered humanity in the name of Jesus? We are complicit with the perpetrators if we refuse to see and enter in. We are also complicit if we go

ignoring the refuse in our own hearts. If the church does not enter in, then I would ask, is she really living as the body of an incarnated God? How I pray we will follow our Head, full of the light and life of Jesus Christ in the corners of our own hearts *so that* we might truly bring him to the trauma dungeons of this world.

CHAPTER 2

Justice vs. Complicity

In 1994, in a small and beautiful country in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, genocide occurred. About one million people were slaughtered in one hundred days—by friends, neighbors, classmates, and fellow church members—with machetes and hoes and nail-studded clubs. The world watched on television and did nothing. Over twenty years later Rwanda is still reeling and damaged.

I have worked with evil and its resulting trauma in hundreds of lives throughout my career. I have been to places like Burma and Ground Zero while the earth was still hot. The brutality, the frenzy, the scope, *and* the intimacy of the Rwandan genocide is unlike anything I have ever encountered. I have made several trips to this land of a thousand hills. There are one million orphans in the country. There are thousands of widows, many who were raped and now have AIDS, as well as raising AIDS-infected children born of those rapes.

The country was considered 90 percent Christian at the time of the genocide, and the church was complicit in the slaughter. Many people fled into the churches for sanctuary and were massacred within the church walls. Several churches around the country have been left untouched as memorials of what happened. That means you can go into these churches, where sunlight comes through broken stained glass and the Bible sits on the altar, and see the bones

of thousands, lying just as they died—twenty-five hundred in one, four thousand in another, ten thousand in a third, and so on. Hell not only came to Rwanda; it came to the church. One woman said to me, “The churches were the ground of the genocide.” How can such a thing be? How does the sanctuary of God become the house of death? How do people who call themselves Christians slaughter neighbors?

In visiting and doing training in Rwanda, I have been hit hard by what happened in the churches there. I continue to struggle with what I saw and heard. The evil was not done by the bad guys. It was neighbors, classmates, fellow church members, and friends. Rwandans were fed a diet of hatred for others—derogatory terms, ridicule, thinking of others as less than—lots of “tongue-murder” as Matthew Henry describes it.¹ Some of us know what it is like to think about others in this way—those who have hurt us, those we hold a grudge against or carry bitterness toward; those of another race or nationality; those of another political party; those of another economic class; or those of another faith or even another denomination.

Human beings do not go from dinner with friends to genocide in a day or a week. We get there little by little; blind, numb, and not noticing until the horrific seems normal and acceptable. We start with what John refers to in his epistle as hate, literally meaning to spit on another in your heart. It is a small, hidden thing. It is however the seed of demeaning and killing and injustice. First, like the church members at Cape Coast Castle, we think of others as *they*. *They* are not responsible. *They* do not drive correctly. *They* believe in the wrong god. *They* have a twisted sexuality. Then a name is attached to *they*. Stalin spoke of “enemies of the state,” Hitler of “dirty Jews,” and the Hutus of Rwanda called the Tutsis “cockroaches.” If *they* have hurt you, disagreed with you, or do not believe what you do, then you slap on a label like cockroach. Well, we know what you do with cockroaches, right? It is not hard for humans to learn to think that mind-boggling evil and

gross injustice is acceptable. It is a little-by-little seduction until we find ourselves thinking of another human being, created in the image of our God, as a nasty, threatening creature that ought to be stamped out.

Recognizing Egocentricity and Complicity

So what does the Rwandan genocide have to do with us? I have spent close to four decades sitting with the litter of injustice. I have heard stories of oppression, bondage, cruelty, terror, imprisonment, violence, deceit, malice, and rage. I have seen such stories on terrified faces, in dead eyes, and in trembling bodies. As in Rwanda, a good portion of what I have seen and heard—though certainly not all—has been wrought by the so-called church of Jesus Christ. So I come to this topic not as a victim of grave injustice, not as a theologian or philosopher with ideas about injustice, and actually not even so much as a psychologist. I come today as one who has borne witness, and from that place I would like to tell you something of what I know, what I have seen and heard, and what I long to see for his name's sake.

Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, said this: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality [and I would add silence] always helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."² And so I want us to look at injustice and its polar opposite, justice, which we are told is a requirement of our God for his people. It is not a lofty idea; it is not a suggestion; it is not a liberal cause; and it is not simply for those who are not busy. It is a requirement of the God who is himself Justice.

Through the prophet Micah our God says this: "Hear now what the LORD is saying . . . 'the LORD has a case against His people. . . . What have I done to you, And how have I wearied

you? . . . Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt . . . the house of slavery [I brought you out from injustice]” (Micah 6:1–4).

Some listening and seemingly tortured soul responds to God’s query in verses 6–7: “With what shall I come to the LORD and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” [A strange thought for approaching the God who said you shall not kill.]

Then the response follows: You want to know what God requires—which obviously means that he does require something—“He has told you, O man, what is good” (v. 8). God has not left us without revelation regarding what he requires. That word *require* includes a seeking, searching out. You know what God is seeking, what he is searching for. We do not have to guess or try various options. He has spoken to the people he himself freed from oppression and injustice. The answer: do justice, love mercy, and walk in humility with me. “How shall I come before God and bow myself down?” Is that not a question of worship? How shall I rightly worship God? Do justice. I, the God you worship, am searching for justice. In essence I am the Redeemer God who brought you out of the land of oppression, bondage, and injustice. If you would worship me, then you must look like me. Do justice.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). If we worship a God who is just, who hates injustice, and cannot participate in it for one second and remain himself, then we as his people will also love and do justice. We will be known for it. That means those of us who know God will render justice to those who are vulnerable. Our justice will serve as a memorial in the flesh of God’s deliverance of his people. What would that look like? I can only answer by taking you to some of the places I have been and asking you to bear witness with me as

we ask God to show us where we are not like him, and therefore fail to truly worship him.

Before asking you to bear witness with me, I would first like you to consider two things—I am sure there are more—that are major hindrances to our pursuit of justice. The first of these is our deeply entrenched egocentricity. During the years of my work I have been profoundly struck by the egocentricity of my own heart. I find I am not naturally moved by the evil, sin, and suffering of this world to do justice until it infringes on my world, my comfort, and my relationships. The evil, sin, and suffering that do not touch my world I work hard to keep at a distance. It is disturbing, messy, and inconvenient. God has used the work I do as a corrective measure in many ways.

Over the decades I have worked with many people—people the normal course of events would have never brought into my life. I have been inside things like abuse, suicide, terror, torment, trauma, trafficking, deception, abuse of power, and wordless grief. Such things were not mine; they belonged to other people. They were brought to me, however, and I was invited in. Going into such things has disturbed my thinking, my feelings, and my sleep. I have had to change my mind about things I was sure were true and ask questions I thought had been already answered.

In the last twenty years I have been involved in an inner-city counseling ministry that has brought me face-to-face with more disturbing things. Do you know that 50 percent of all babies born to women under thirty are born to unwed mothers? Think how many adolescents are growing up without fathers. Add to that corrupt systems, children treated like a number—or worse, like animals—homeless mothers or pregnant women, crack babies starved to death, violent police, hideous racism, filth and poverty and despair travelling down from one generation to another—all thirty minutes from my comfortable home and church.

Where are we? Why have I ignored my fellow human beings in the city? Why have I never even given a thought to those in the

city who know and love the same Christ I do but cannot feed their families or afford rent? The Word of God says that what I do to the least I have done to my Lord. How is it that I even consider these human beings as *least*? Who am I to say another is *least*? Is that not making others *they*? But oh, I like to think of that Scripture when I do something for another that the world would consider “little.” But does that Scripture also mean my failures or lack of loving and doing justice are done to Christ as well?

Outside my backyard, there is also the world. When I began travelling internationally, I would return home from hearing about the systemic sexual abuse in Brazil, the hideous oppression in Burma, the endemic rape in Congo, or the genocide in Rwanda and wait to “get over it”—to recover. I have learned through the years that God does not mean for me to get over it. I have met and worked with precious believers worldwide who have no training, no resources, no Bibles, and no books. These Christians love their people. They are committed to them. They long to help them. Meanwhile we are producing more books than we need in this country and building bigger churches. Do you suppose that is what justice looks like? I fear that we are often sleeping in the garden rather than watching with our Savior because the suffering is not ours. It does not touch our lives. It does not affect our world.

God is slowly dismantling my egocentricity and bringing me little by little into identification with his point of view. F. W. H. Meyers in his poem “Saint Paul” expresses it clearly: “Desperate tides of the whole great world’s anguish forced thro’ the channels of a single heart.”³ *That* is God’s point of view; *that* is an expression of his heart. The whole world’s anguish, including each of ours, has flowed through that great heart. My love of comfort and preference for protection from the tragedies and sordid nature of things in this world means I have a heart unlike his. He who dwelt in heaven, in the high and holy place, who donned human flesh and walked among the filth and torment of this world to the extent that the spit of others ran down his face as he suffered their

injustices, has called us to identify with *his* point of view. He is seeking, searching to see justice. Does his church satisfy this cry of his heart?

You know another manifestation of this egocentricity is our thinking that everyone is like us. It is the inverse of thinking of others as *they*, the other side of the same coin. When I am working with young counselors, this egocentric thinking has to be confronted again and again. They tend to assume “sad” means what they mean when they say they are sad. They assume that saying “I stopped an addiction a long time ago” means years ago when it often means three days ago. They can easily assume the pain is less than reported, the depression lighter than stated, and the options available to the client more numerous than what they have heard. These assumptions are based on their own life experiences, their own levels of struggle, their own access to energy and resources, and their own levels of success.

We do this when we confront injustice, and this is where we see the same basic assumptions we had for people as *they*. If people worked harder, were more responsible, were not lazy, or simply thought differently, they would not be victims of injustice. We end up holding children morally responsible for sexual abuse, victims are blamed for rape, and battered wives own their husband’s violence. Our egocentricity says to us, “You have experienced these things because you have _____” —not been responsible; not loved your spouse well; not made moral choices, etc. We do the same for poverty and lack of jobs. Implicit is the idea that if they did what we did, made similar choices to ours, or behaved well, then injustice would not be present in their lives. If someone is downtrodden or oppressed, it is probably their fault. It is as if we think that all injustice is due to individual choices. Rather than lifting up the downtrodden, we walk on their heads in judgment and barely concealed disdain. All the while our God is seeking, searching for justice and has called us to do the same through the prophet Isaiah. “Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the

ruthless” (Isaiah 1:17). The ruthless? That must mean there are unjust people out there who trample on others no matter what they do.

I had this vividly taught to me by a pastor in Brazil many years ago. He had just moved with his family to pastor a church in a small town. He came to me at the end of a training session and told me the following: “Diane, all the men in my village are alcoholics—no exception. All the men in my village beat their wives—no exception. All the men in my village have sex with their daughters—no exception. Diane, can you please tell me how do I help my village?” Now understand when he said “all the men” he included all the police, the judges, and the pastors of that village. He alone was not doing what he described. Every system in that village was corrupted; injustice was the norm. No one growing up there ever saw anything different, and there was no one to turn to for justice. The developing world is full of towns, cities, or nations like this. Our own inner cities are full of systems like this. You can do right and still have everything turn out wrong. I am not certain where we got the idea that was not so, given that the one we follow and call God did do everything right and ended up treated with gross injustice.

So often, rather than suffer involvement with messy injustices and corrupt systems (sometimes even a system of which I am part), I choose the quiet way, the easy way, and sin against Justice himself. I turn a deaf ear to the voice of God saying, “I require; I am searching for justice.” I would rather sin against Justice himself than allow the suffering of others and the injustices they live with daily to alter my schedule, my comfort level, and my tidy life.

The result of my egocentricity is that I find myself untouched by the great suffering and injustices in this world, down the street, and in the pews of my church or its neighborhood. I judge the oppressed as lacking, implying of course that somehow their grave experiences of injustice are in fact just, because if they had made the right choices, they would be justly treated. After all, isn’t it true

that if you work hard and do right justice will always follow? In thinking this way and acting on this belief I disagree with the God I claim to worship—the one who always did right and was met with murderous injustice.

Secondly, due to my desire to avoid suffering of any kind, I prefer the sin that allows me to keep things as they are in order to avoid distress and discomfort and pain. I do not want to see the injustices of the world, my world. I do not want to know about the corruptions that occur in places of power, the cover-ups, the victims silenced, and the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, and the alien ignored. I do not want to face the claim others have on my life simply because I am a follower of a just God.

Several years ago I stood before a plaque in the genocide memorial in Kigali, Rwanda. Following the definition of genocide is the list of those things that are punishable as genocide. Number five is complicity. The word literally has to do with folding together. It means to be an accomplice, a partner in wrongdoing. To be silent about the injustices in this world is to be folded together with those who carry out violence and evil and corruption. As the church of Jesus Christ we are to be witnesses to what is true. And yes, that means speaking boldly about the God who came in the flesh to redeem broken humanity. But it also means speaking the truth *about injustice* and calling evil by its right name. A truth-teller disturbs, alerts, wakens, and warns against indifference to injustice and complacency about the needs of human beings. The world knew what was happening in Germany in the 1930s and remained silent. The world knew about the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz and remained silent. The world knew about the genocide in Rwanda and remained silent. We know now that Haitians are not okay; the Rwandans are not okay; the Congolese are not okay. We know our cities are sick. The poor are beaten down, receiving totally inadequate education and dying in the streets. We know girls in our cities and towns are being trafficked. Some of us also know of abuse in our families and our churches and have

done and said nothing so as to protect the structure, the institution, rather than the victim. When it comes to injustice, silence is not a virtue; it is a vice two times compounded because it contains both indifference to the victims and complicity with the destroyers. In such instances we have failed to do justice. The call to do justice is the call to be like God. In failing to do justice, we do not look like Christ in this world. In not looking like Christ, we have failed to worship him.

Hearing Testimonies of Injustice

Now I would ask you to come with me and bear witness to a few of the injustices I have seen or confronted in various forms. Hear from some individuals what injustice was like for them. Let us consider some of the world's great anguish that has forced a channel through our great God's heart. This is a tiny portion of anguish and injustice borne by our God.

The voice of Elie Wiesel in *The Night Trilogy*, his account of his time in the Nazi death camps:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my Faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.⁴

He was fifteen years old and had just entered Birkenau, the reception center for Auschwitz. The world knew. And over that

world is a God who says: do justice. Do you know there are genocide survivors from Germany, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda in our cities?

The voice of a woman in the 1800s:

It was in a Bible class . . . that I defended some religious opinions which conflicted with the creed of the church in that place, which brought upon me the charge of insanity. . . . I was kidnapped when my husband forced his way into my room through the window with an axe. . . . Two doctors felt my pulse and without asking a single question declared me insane. This was the only medical examination I had and the only trial of any kind I was allowed. . . . I was forced from my home and had to leave my six children and precious babe of eighteen months. . . . When once in the Asylum I was beyond the reach of all human aid. . . . I lay closely imprisoned three years, being never allowed to set my foot on the ground after the first four months. . . . I returned to my husband and little ones, only to be again treated as a lunatic. My husband cut me off from my friends, intercepted my mail, made me a prisoner in my own home and began to plan how to have me incarcerated for life.⁵

The act was carried out by so-called men of faith, but in fact the husband wanted a different wife and this injustice provided the way. Women continue to be silenced and abused by prominent men in power in the very churches where we worship. Is it safe for them to speak?

Gerry, a troubled woman in her early twenties, experienced a chaotic childhood and family history that is so familiar among the multi-crisis poor that we could reconstruct her past without knowing the details. As a foster child she was abused intermittently and raped more than once. She lived in eight different homes and attended six schools, most of them full of violence and no resources.

She never finished high school. As a member of a large, disorganized family she was often ignored and sometimes pulled back in to serve as caretaker for others. Over the years she has lived in shelters, been addicted to drugs, grappled with drug programs, and maintained on-and-off relationships with many men. She has seen her children placed with other families and has tried to comply with the conditions for their return. She has told her story in multiple agencies, none of which have ultimately been helpful. The caseworkers are overworked and the news report just came out that the higher-ups had been embezzling money meant for clients. She has had to trade sex for food and twice traded the same for early release from the local jail where she landed due to trading sex for food.

Gerry is poor, abused, uncertain, confused, depressed, and irresponsible. She does not want the life she has but cannot find a way out. Actually she finds it hard to even envision anything else. Her life looks like her mother's before her.

Our cities are full of women like Gerry. Our God is searching for justice.

Gilbert Gauthe was the first Catholic priest in the nation to face a criminal indictment on multiple charges of child molestation. The indictment charged that he had molested 36 children in all. When Ray Mouton, the lawyer asked to defend him, dug around, he learned that the Louisiana diocese knew about seven other pedophile priests and had done nothing. The story is long and complicated, but in the end the priest went free with no required supervision. He never was sent to the psychiatric facility as promised when he pleaded guilty. He was given long furloughs to his mother, given a private prison office, and took teenage prisoners as assistants. He took them into his "office," shaved their body hair, and had sex with them. He served seven years of a twenty-year sentence and, aided by an old family friend, was set free in 1995.

I repeatedly get calls from churches and Christian organizations around the country about sexual abuse in their midst. They want help but hope no one has to know—children abused by dynamic youth leaders the church wants to protect or pastors abusing four to six women in a congregation. “But, Diane, he is so charismatic and the church has grown.” *Do justice.*

She was twelve and lonely. Her parents were members of the church and quite active. She was required to attend youth group and the new twenty-six-year-old pastor paid special attention to her. He included her in things and she often ran errands with him to keep him company. He bought her some nice things and took her for ice cream or lunch. He said she was pretty. Then he started texting and sending emails. It was a little weird, but she felt important. One day he asked her to meet him for an errand he had to run and then drove the car to an out-of-the-way place and raped her. He told her if she ever told, no one would believe her because the families of the church all loved him.

Obviously there are forms of coercion that can be effected without physical force against those who are vulnerable. He had raped her about thirty times before she found the nerve to tell her parents. They did not believe her at first and then wondered what she had done to cause it. They went to the head pastor. He told her she was seductive and ruining a young man of God. She was forced to sign a confession and ask forgiveness. The pastor said it would ruin the church if people found out and certainly ruin a promising minister’s future.

She left home at seventeen and the folks there have often talked about what a troubled girl she is and how she is making terrible choices. They do not understand why someone from such a wonderful home and church could turn out that way. They heard rumors but of course they could not possibly be true. “He is, after all, such a fine young pastor.” *I, the Lord, love justice.*

“Cry loudly . . . raise your voice . . . declare to My people their transgression . . . on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers. . . . Is this not the fast which I choose? To loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house? . . .

“If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness. . . . You will be like . . . a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (Isaiah 58:1–11)

Who is like the LORD our God, who is enthroned on high? . . . He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. (Psalm 113:5–7)

For I, the LORD, love justice. (Isaiah 61:8)

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. (James 2:1)

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27 *ESV*)

And in the old Scottish Psalter, psalm 82: “In the gods’ assembly, God doth stand; he judges gods among. How long, accepting persons vile will ye give judgment wrong? Defend the poor and fatherless; to poor oppressed do right. The poor and needy ones set free; rid them from ill men’s might.”⁶

Serving the God of Justice

The word of our God down through the centuries tells us that he himself is justice. That same word also calls us to bear his image in the world. We do that first by loving and worshiping him, and

second by living that worship out—looking like him in this world. Our first and grandest mission in life is to love God. But this God we adore happens to be in love with humanity. That means that true worship is seen or played out in our relationships to our fellow human beings.

If we love God, if we reverence his holy name, then his love and justice and humility will be seen in us. Like the Word of God—both written and flesh—the church is an instrument in the world for the revelation of God. Whatever God’s heart is toward the cities of this world—toward victims, toward the poor, the orphaned or alien, the alone, the vulnerable, the abused, the victim of deception or corruption—that should also be the attitude of his church. It is also true that whatever his heart toward the arrogant, the deceivers, and the powerful that use power to hurt others—that too should be the attitude of the church.

My father was a colonel in the United States Air Force. He graduated from a military school, went on to flight school, and then headed for Europe and World War II. He returned home with medals he never displayed. When I was thirteen, the man who flew for Strategic Air Command and was a superb athlete was retired due to a debilitating illness no one could diagnose. He spent the next thirty-two years becoming increasingly disabled and lived out the last years of his life in a nursing home.

As my father’s disease progressed, his body went from coordinated athlete to unable to tie his own shoes or get out of a chair. Eventually he was unable to get his feet to walk down a hallway. I learned many lessons from my father’s life. Here are two primary ones: First, a body that does not follow its head is a sick body. My father was a bright man who knew many things. He certainly knew how to tie his shoes and how to walk. However, he could not get his body to do what his head knew how to do. His body would not follow his head. The church of Jesus Christ has a head. Our Head has called us to follow him. Where we do not, we are sick.

Second, unchecked, untreated disease—whether due to denial or lack of treatment options—will eventually infest, strangle, and destroy the entire system. It will become less and less able to function as it was meant to. Initially my father’s body continued to follow his head; the deviations were small and could even be hidden. Over time, it gradually and more obviously failed to do so. At the end it turned that coordinated, 6-foot-4-inch body into a wreck of its former self. His head no longer directed his body, and eventually, his body died.

We follow a just God. He has said he loves justice. He stood on this planet and declared himself anointed to bring good news to the afflicted; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners. God, whose doctrine is certainly impeccable and infallible, apparently saw the need for it to be fleshed out, lived and seen in a body. He still does. He has us here to follow his head, and where we do not look like him we have unchecked, untreated disease. And we can remove ourselves from the faces that remind us of our failures—we can live apart, never enter in, turn off the news, make quick judgments to relieve ourselves of responding—but eventually the small deviations we have deceived ourselves into finding acceptable will lead to greater disease and the voice of God disobeyed will lead to the voice of God, our head, unheard. That is a very dangerous place for a soul to live.

In closing, let’s revisit the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle and chapel sitting above it. I have wondered since then: What if that one body of those who said they were believers had gone down into the dungeons and set the captives free? What if they had taken them out into the light, fed them, clothed them, educated them, and set them free? They would have had to stand up against their superiors, the pattern and print of that age, their cultural norms both secular and Christian, and the greatest empire on earth at that time. They would have caused a stir of rage and indignation on at least three continents. But when our God interfaces with this

world, he leaves the higher and descends. He leaves the beauty and enters chaos; he leaves the pure and goes into filthy. He goes against the mainstream, certainly culturally and economically, but even more he demonstrates that God is one who does not just speak but actually does things in this world—first in the hearts of human beings, and then through the lives and bodies of those same human beings. Jesus gave us a manifestation in the flesh of the character of God; his church is to do the same for the world.

Those churches that worship over and separate and are untouched by dungeons are not worshiping the God of the Scriptures. There is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that being hateful, unjust, neutral, or uncaring and deaf to the cries of humans is godly. The dungeons of Cape Coast Castle were not just below; they were also rampant in the hearts of the worshippers.

The dungeons are not just out there—though they exist all over the world and in our neighborhoods. They are in here, in our hearts. John says to us: “Whoever has the world’s goods [money, influence, reputation, expertise, power], and sees his brother in need and *closes his heart against him*, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17, italics added). Earlier we said that when John talks about hate in the heart, it literally means “to spit on someone in your heart.” God is concerned about the dungeons of our hearts—our favoritism, our discrimination, our prejudice, our harsh judgments, our choices to be blind and deaf, and our self-protections—as much as he is concerned with the dungeons we are neglecting “out there” in our cities, communities, churches, and families. We are not fit to do the justice of God in this world unless he has first brought light and life into the dungeons of our souls. How else will we bring the life of God to the oppressed? Programs, education, clean water, medicine, food, jobs, and counseling all matter greatly to desperate human beings. We are called by God to do those things, but we are called to do them with hearts that have gone from being dungeons and are transformed

into the sanctuary of the God who loves human beings—including us.

And so my fellow believers, I pray we will recognize ourselves first and foremost as the “they.” We are the enemies of the kingdom; we are the dirty alien worthy of elimination; we are of the impure race; we are the “other,” the less-than, and we have worshiped the wrong god. We are the unwashed and imprisoned; we are the fatherless. As we see these things, we will walk humbly with the Almighty God we say we worship. And as we see him we will see him take a towel, love the alien, lift up the fallen, touch the unclean, and welcome into his kingdom those utterly unlike himself. He came to serve; not to enslave men to serve him, lift him, or ensure his pleasure. He is the antithesis of Cape Coast Castle. When we see him as in a mirror, beholding the glory of the one who became like us, we will be transformed into the same image.

I, the Lord, love justice.

What does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.