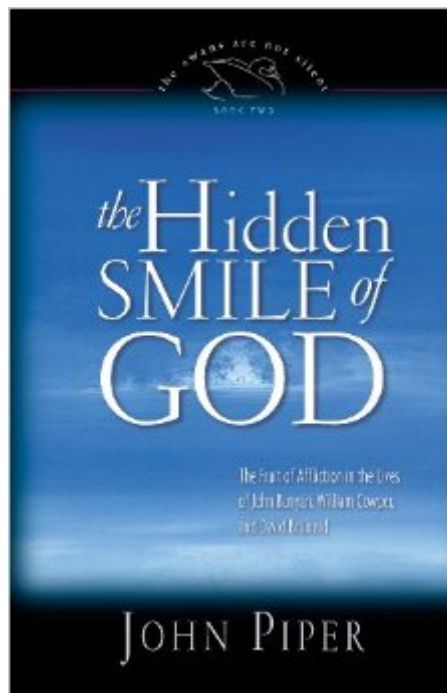


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The Hidden Smile Of God: The Fruit Of Affliction In The Lives Of John Bunyan, William Cowper, And David Brainerd (Swans Are Not Silent)



Synopsis

Bunyan. Cowper. Brainerd. We read their stories and wonder how they endured. How does one survive twelve years in a dank prison cell? How does one survive month after month of a depression so debilitating that death seems the only hope? How does one endure tuberculosis? Or cancer, or emptiness, or death, or loneliness, or divorce? Whatever the trial may be, how does one endure without the soul shriveling up and blowing away with the breeze? In the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd, we find the strength of soul that not only endures hardship, but honors God in the midst of it. The Giver and Sustainer of life enabled them to worship through all their suffering. That's why their affliction bore so much fruit. The story of their suffering, their perseverance, and their passion is one that can inspire the same hunger for the supremacy of God in your life. John Piper invites you to read their stories, consider their lives, and be encouraged that no labor and no suffering in the path of Christian obedience is ever in vain. Even the bleak hill of Golgotha was a skull with a frown of affliction on its face. But "behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face." Just as Bunyan's, Cowper's, and Brainerd's suffering produced the worship and humility that is essential to Christian living, we too can look to God for great privileges to come from our own pain. And we too can remember, "The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In our day of self-help and "feel good" religion this may seem a strange book to many. Through the looking glass of the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd, John Piper reminds us of something the Puritans called "The frowning providence of God." This is the second in a series of books called, *The Swans are Not Silent*. Each book in this series takes a theme and then examines that theme in the Scripture and the lives of believers of the past. The theme of this work is suffering and affliction. As always, Piper stretches our faith well beyond the normal comfort zones of evangelical thought. One can feel his sorrow as Bunyan parted from his family to spend 12 years in prison. It was in that prison however, that *Pilgrim's Progress* was born. Piper carries us with William Cowper into the darkness of an insane asylum where in utter despair he finally found the grace and mercy of God. From that darkness Cowper broke into glorious light, writing that great hymn, *There is a Fountain Filled With Blood*. We are transported back to the apparent failure of David Brainerd as he was expelled from Yale for questioning the salvation of an instructor. We walk with Brainerd through his short years as a missionary to the Indians. Piper reminds us that none of us know what waves will spread out from a pebble dropped into the ocean of God's will. *The Hidden Smile of God* is the kind of book that you won't put down once you open it. This is a much needed book in our day. So-called Christian broadcasting is beaming a message around the world of feel-good easiness. It may be a hard word to embrace but it is true. God's people are not spared from affliction and trouble. They are brought through these things in the grace and mercy of God.

This second book in Piper's new series "*The Swans are not Silent*" is an excellent biographical account of three men: John Bunyan, William Cowper (pronounced Cooper), and David Brainerd. The common thread joining the lives of these three men is suffering. Hence the subtitle: "the fruit of affliction in the lives of ..." Piper gives us a good introduction to Bunyan, the tinker turned Baptist preacher who spent twelve years in Bedford jail in the 1600's because he wouldn't promise to quit preaching. Bunyan was also the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* - probably the most widely-read Christian book besides the Bible ever published. Piper shows how Bunyan learned the secret to enduring suffering by "seeing God who is invisible." This sketch is a great encouragement to persevere. The second biography is of a different sort, looking at the life of the melancholy poet, William Cowper, who authored the best hymn on God's providence ever written, "*God Moves in a Mysterious Way*." Cowper's life was checkered with depression, insanity, and multiple suicide attempts - a strange candidate for a Christian hero. Yet, Piper shows how through John Newton's tireless encouragement, Cowper managed to find windows of hope in his all but despair-filled life. It is a sad story, but an encouraging one. Those who appreciate poetry and the agony of soul that

often breeds it, will appreciate this sketch of Cowper. The third sketch covers the life of David Brainerd, the Yale student who was expelled for an untimely word, and became a missionary to the Indians. Despite tuberculosis and harsh living conditions, Brainerd pressed on in the wearisome labor of translation and preaching for the conversion of dozens of Indians. Drawing from the diary and journal compiled by Jonathan Edwards, Piper shows how Brainerd's fasting, prayer, and study helped sustain him through unmitigated suffering and affliction in the work of evangelizing the heathen - and how his example has inspired generations of missionaries (William Carey, Henry Martyn, and Jim Elliot to name a few) ever since. Brainerd's great passion was well expressed in his own words: "O that I may not loiter in my heavenly journey!" What an example. These biographical masterpieces were first delivered as lectures at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Dr. Piper pastors. The audio cassettes are available from their ministry outreach (web site). I recommend these without reserve to those who want to be encouraged in the midst of suffering for the sake of the Kingdom.

The second of Piper's *The Swans are Not Silent* series, this book was the most difficult to read because of the subject it dealt with - suffering. Piper selected three great men of the faith, known for their devotion to the Lord and their godly walk and let the reader peak behind the curtains of their lives - and the suffering, depression, attempted suicide and struggles of these three men was very distressing. Yet, even as Bunyan faced his twelve years in prison for preaching the gospel, he saw his struggles actually ordained and orchestrated by God for His own glory; a view that both Cowper and Brainerd shared regarding their own hardships and turmoil. In a country where suffering is avoided at all costs and seen by many as spiritual weakness, the lives of Bunyan, Cowper and Brainerd shout a different story about the sovereign hand of God in the lives of His children. 1 Peter chapter 4 tells us that we should not consider suffering strange, but rather as a sign that the Lord truly is in control and that He is working out our salvation for His own glory through our hardships. Looking back at the lives of these three saints, it is easy to see how God has been glorified in their struggles - from the writings of Bunyan to the poems and hymns of Cowper to the effectual call to ministry that the life of Brainerd has had on hundreds if not thousands who followed him. While these three struggled greatly, many have tasted the fruit of eternal peace from their hardships. All four books of this series are outstanding - highly recommended for all Christians to read. Piper introduces us to some great men of the faith and challenges us with their lives to walk in a manner worthy of our calling as those who went before us have done.

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