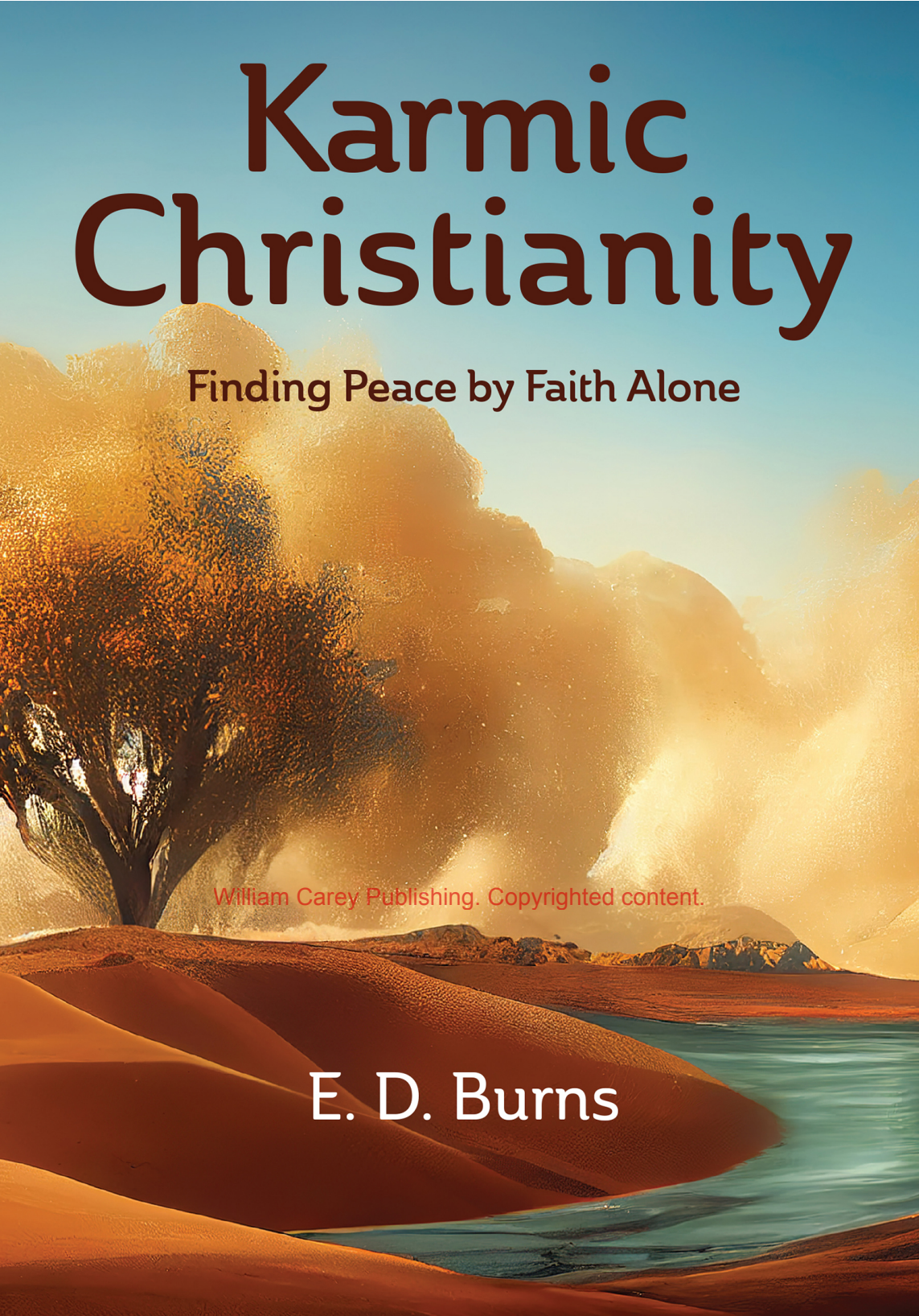
Karmic Christianity

Finding Peace by Faith Alone



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E. D. Burns

Karmic Christianity: Finding Peace by Faith Alone
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Chapter 1

Karma and God's Purposes

Scripture for Memory

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (Job 19:25–27)

"God, what did I do to deserve this?" Olivia sobbed as her hopes and dreams vanished in a moment. Her husband had broken her heart, again. He was her high school sweetheart, her pastor's son, and she would never forget how godly he seemed in youth group and how dominant he was on the football field. After high school, Jackson enlisted in the military, and Olivia busily served the Lord in a Zambian orphanage. After his first tour and Olivia's stint in Zambia, they returned to their small town and married. Yet something was different about Jackson. A secret drinking problem he hid away in high school followed him to the frontlines and back home. Olivia would find him drinking late into the night, and she'd scold him back to sobriety for a while. But tonight, she didn't catch him in time—Jackson crashed his car. With the sirens still ringing in her ears, she stared in the bathroom mirror at a new widow. A month later, Olivia would miscarry their first baby. She wondered where she missed God's will. All the signs of blessing were there: Jackson was the youth group's passionate worship leader, the football team's record-breaking quarterback, and the hometown war hero. Olivia was the church's esteemed missionary to Africa. But she seemed to have missed the Lord's perfect will, and now she was paying for it.

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Samantha, on the other hand, Olivia's twin sister, was a chronic struggler. Occasionally she'd slip out of high school youth group to smoke weed. She dropped out of high school her senior year to work at the mall with her boyfriend. She'd move in with a new guy every year or so and then go to church during holidays to pacify her parents' angst. Samantha lived in the fast lane. The rush of playing the rebel was a thrill. But one day, her world came crashing down. She overheard a Christian song playing in a coffee shop. It was a song she used to sing in youth group whenever she would attend. Something shifted deep in her soul. All her sins flashed before her mind, and the gospel messages she blew off in youth group flooded her conscience. By the time she got home, Samantha, through her tears, was praising Jesus for saving her soul. The year after Olivia miscarried and was widowed, Samantha gave birth to twin sons after marrying a godly man who worked for her father. At her baby shower, Olivia grimaced. She knew envy and hate were sinful, but they seemed like the only just emotions. How in the world did her prodigal sister deserve such blessings? What was so wrong with Olivia that God would punish her so severely? Was God trustworthy? Was he good? Did God have favorites? What did Samantha do to change God's mind and get all her blessings? How was Olivia not good enough? This just wasn't fair.

Good Luck or Finding God's Will?

There's something about underdog stories that attract our attention, whether they be about shepherd boys slaying giants or humble hobbits carrying a coveted ring to Mount Doom. Sometimes we are tempted to envy those who, against all odds, seem to find the secrets to success and satisfaction—great jobs, great families, great vacations, great relationships with the Lord. Sometimes we want to imitate them because there's something they must have done differently with their lives that brought about so much of God's blessings. So we listen carefully for hints on how they eat, exercise, do their devotions, parent their children, date their spouse, build their careers, and so on.

We can subconsciously assume that the successful person whom we idealize so much has somehow tapped into the secret of God's will. What is it about that person that God loves to bless? At church they raise their hands in passionate worship. Maybe they truly love God with their whole heart—

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radical surrender, abandoned devotion, crazy love. They could sing of God's love forever, and indeed they probably do.

These people are attractive—healthy bodies, charming personalities, happy families, immaculate houses, and stable finances. Their life song seems to go something like, "Jesus loves me this I know, for my blessings tell me so." We wonder what lucky charm they picked up along the way. We observe secret clues to God's favor over them: daily Bible reading, homeschooling, classical education, organic foods, music lessons, Christian radio, positive and upbeat demeanor, hearing God's voice, sweet intimacy with Jesus, and the list goes on. We call it "finding God's will," "walking in the Spirit," "living in obedience," or simply "following Jesus."

All these labels are code for "good karma." It's a transactional religion. Good things happen to good-enough-Christians. Like most parents, God has favorites among his children. And he blesses those who know how to move his heart.

Bad Luck or Missing God's Will?

Nevertheless, there are those times when Christians go through repeated trials—maybe cancer, a financial loss, a house fire, and the like. Maybe that's you. For a time, you even seemed happy and successful. But a switch was flipped in your life. Instinctively, you slowly conclude that God is disciplining you for something that you need to figure out. You don't want to miss the lesson and then repeat the same test. Unlike those you've observed who hear the voice of the Spirit and soak in Jesus's special love, you don't radiate the same dreamy sentimentality for Jesus. In fact, people think you can be downright plain—even a bit dour sometimes.

You play the game of comparisons. There are the *haves* and *have-nots*. Not only are you a *have-not*, but you're also a *has-been*. You once had God's ear. His eyes were on you, and you loved to sing his praises. But after the miscarriage and job loss, you've done some soul searching. Is God trying to get your attention now? But for what? Was it because you enrolled your child in public school? Maybe it was because you secretly doubted when people at church prayed so passionately for you. You didn't have enough faith. Could it have been that you married the wrong person? You know you shouldn't have been talking to singles online. You should have followed your pastor's advice to only date within your church. Maybe the cancer is because you didn't take advantage of God's natural foods and remedies. And the worst

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of it is that your personal Bible study has slipped. Your prayer life feels dry. You say it's because you're a busy parent and your health has declined. But you beat yourself up inside. You know you've failed God. You've departed God's perfect will. You stop investing in God's will, and your spiritual portfolio of blessings becomes obsolete.

Again, here is another version of transactional religion. This is all code for "bad karma." Bad things happen to not-good-enough Christians. You were one of God's favorites, and you knew it when you'd feel the surge of passion during summer camp. But you no longer impress him. He is over you now and has moved on. Sure, he loves you. But he probably doesn't like you as much anymore.

To play off an iconic cultural analogy, the Eagles' anthem of the 1970s captured well what it can feel like to get stuck in an endless cycle. Welcome to "hotel karmafornia": "We are all just prisoners here, of our own device." "This could be heaven or this could be hell." "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

Job's Friends and God's Faithfulness

If you've ever received counsel from a pastor, parent, or fellow Christian about discerning God's voice and what he might be teaching or showing you during a time of severe trial, you might have felt confused and frustrated. Maybe even unfairly treated. You couldn't control the lies and misrepresentations that were hurled at you, and their social media posts spread like wildfire. To add insult to injury, you totaled your car in an accident that was not your fault. Now you limp around with a fractured leg. But really, you limp around with a fractured soul because the advice you've received consists of calling you to discern what God might be saying to you. You better learn your lesson so you don't have to go through this again. Whatever it is, it must be deeply lodged in your life, since this is what it took for God to weed it out.

Inevitably, the navel-gazing and dizzying introspection begins. As your world spins out of control, the unsolicited comments and advice keep beating you up. It's all done in the name of Christian love and pastoral care, of course. And to be fair, most people who say such ridiculous things truly think they are helping. If we're honest, we've all probably said similar things to others or even to ourselves. But in fact, none of us understand the mysterious

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providences of God. We are unwittingly binding the conscience and going beyond Scripture. Partly out of immaturity, partly out of presumption, and partly out of unbiblical advice we have also received.

Similarly, as Job's friends gave him a mixture of naïve opinions, decent theology with bad application, and just plain tit-for-tat religion, they missed the point. They assumed that Job, who on the surface appeared to be a righteous man, must have harbored a secret sin that God was now exposing. But when they couldn't accuse him of anything that would stick, they left the interpretation of God's severity for Job to decipher. They're hands were clean. They did their duty in admonishing Job. Apparently, he had made his bed, and he was going to sleep in it. In other words, you reap what you sow. Job's friends are the classic karmic counselors. Such people assign secret sins and bad motives to chronic strugglers whose suffering has no relevant correlation to a known sin.

Keep in mind that rejecting a karmic view of Christianity doesn't mean that you are always innocent and that God has nothing to teach you in your adversity. Neither does it mean that patterns of obedience don't generally contribute to good outcomes. We must be careful not to interpret every affliction as a sign of God's disapproval, but we must also be careful not to harden ourselves against the blessing of God's fatherly discipline in hardship. For those united to Christ, God uses affliction for our good. Always. Even if that affliction is an actual direct consequence of sin, God's disposition toward us in Christ is always grace and blessing. God may indeed bring good from fatherly chastisement in producing a humble and repentant heart. But discipline is always a form of purification and never punishment. Never. As the Scripture says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

Nevertheless, we must stop trying to decode the mysterious providences of God in our pain and even in our blessings as though we can control them if we can only locate their triggers. We need to stop assuming we can figure out God's purposes this side of heaven. The issue here is not that wicked choices are without consequence. There are indeed temporal consequences for sin, like draining your finances with a gambling addiction, crashing your car while driving drunk, or losing your marriage because of adultery. That's why there are incalculable warnings in Scripture about fleeing sin and pursing righteousness. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.

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