GOD AS OVERWHELMINGLY OTHER

From Gethsemane Weakness to Faith

Paul Moser

IF GOD IS ALMIGHTY, or 'the Power' (Mark 14:62; Matthew 26:64), we should expect God to have power that can surprise and even overwhelm people at times. Jesus seems overwhelmed by God in his cry of forsakenness from the cross: 'At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mark 15:34). Aside from the distinction between *being* forsaken by God and *merely feeling* forsaken, we may infer that Jesus was overwhelmed in some way by God. His expectations of God had left him with troubling perplexity, given his lack of a prompt felt response from God to his crucifixion.

Even so, the role of being overwhelmed by God in human faith can contribute to a morally robust conception of a God who is genuinely curative, rather than an idol. A curative God is actively redemptive towards humans, seeking what is lastingly good for them, in reconciliation with God.

Some Faces of Overwhelming

Something overwhelms a person when that thing moves the person to be taken aback or overcome in some way. In addition, a person is *consciously* overwhelmed when he or she consciously experiences the thing as prompting those feelings. Different responses are possible, such as being surprised, awed, invigorated, excited, elated, frightened, haunted, troubled, angered, distressed, traumatized, subdued, defeated, vanquished, overtaken, puzzled, perplexed, displaced, or upset. Being overwhelmed, then, manifests itself in various positive and negative ways.

Being overwhelmed typically involves being deeply affected, even if we do not understand how. If we acknowledge God, we may spontaneously

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ask of God, 'Why, God, has this happened?' Answers, however, are not always forthcoming. Humans find themselves overwhelmed by different things in different ways at different times, without having any common account of the causes or purpose of their experiences. Some people hold that at least many cases of being overwhelmed are ultimately meaningless. Given our cognitive limits, we certainly are not in a position to identify the meaning underlying all such cases.

Some sources and cases of being overwhelmed are good; others are definitely not. Neglect of this truth will distort the nature of being overwhelmed. We may be consciously overwhelmed by the kindness or mercy of strangers, prompting us to renounce selfish or vengeful attitudes in our own lives. We may also be overwhelmed by the effects of natural or manmade disasters, violence and trauma. Such phenomena can continue to overwhelm beyond the initial experience, making it difficult even to read or reflect about them at a distance.

The experience of being overwhelmed can prompt people to fear, flee, or resist it, seeking protection, safety or stability. This is no surprise where there is genuine danger. But we may also resist, for example, an overwhelming show of gratuitous kindness. We may be wary of such kindness, suspecting that it comes from a desire to manipulate or exploit us. Perhaps this suspicion arises from a troubled history of manipulation or exploitation by others, but it may block a genuine opportunity to

The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, *by John Martin*

experience goodness in our lives. We need to learn discernment between good and bad overwhelming, and how to receive, rather than to resist, the good, even when it is difficult and frightening. This is an important part of moral maturity, but it may not come easily. A receptive attitude towards good overwhelming can be accompanied by struggle and pain.

Being overwhelmed can, and often does, nudge a person in either of two directions: towards despair or towards hope. When people face a severe, destructive overwhelming experience that seems endless, such as long-term torture, despair often emerges. There seems to be no available good to end the experience and, therefore, the situation can appear to go only from bad to worse. An overwhelming experience of good can provide an antidote to despair, but people acknowledge different such antidotes, and some acknowledge none at all. So, any generalisation about a shared basis for hope will face empirical difficulty among actual humans. What, then, of the power of a curative or redemptive God to counteract overwhelming despair? Is there room for curative overwhelming by God?

From Creation-Enhancing to Overwhelming

In the Abrahamic monotheistic religions God is assumed to be morally perfect and hence free of moral defect. Such a perfect God can be overwhelming at times, however, in various good ways, without *always* being overwhelming; the highly diverse biblical writings, taken as a whole, do not reduce divine action to God's overwhelming of others. They do, however, acknowledge divine overwhelming as a salient and effective way for God to relate to humans. According to the Bible, God's actions towards and interactions with creation include: creating (things and needs), blessing, promising, encountering, self-manifesting, self-hiding, challenging, commanding, redirecting, judging, killing, destroying, forgiving, saving, reconciling, sustaining and fulfilling (promises). These actions and interactions need not overwhelm anyone, although they can do so in certain contexts of human confrontation with God.

God can be present as a causal influence that prompts human actions, but absent from the objects of direct human experience: divine presence cannot be reduced to the (conscious) human *experience* of divine presence. Moreover, God can overwhelm humans without being (consciously) humanly experienced as such. God can hide the divine presence and capacity to overwhelm from humans while maintaining this presence and overwhelming power among them. Such hiding can save humans from premature judgment about God, as it enables them to

become prepared for learning who God really is, by contrast with the gods made in the image of humans.[1]

Karl Rahner has suggested that God can hide in a human experience of silence and thus seem distant, even though God is actually near. Denying that God *is* the silence, Rahner proposes that God can use the silence to distinguish Godself from the counterfeit gods in human lives. He adds:

> Distant from you is only a God who does not exist: a tangible God, a God of a human being's small thoughts and his cheap, timid feelings, a God of earthly security, a God whose concern is that the children don't cry and that philanthropy doesn't fall into disillusion, a very venerable idol! That is what has become distant.[2]

Human despair over this false god does not also entail despair over the God who could be near in the silence and in the felt distance, the God who would not actually forsake the crucified Jesus despite his having felt forsaken.

A common lament concerns why hardship from God—including painful silence, felt distance and stressful overwhelming—looms so large in human experience. It seems to be disproportionate to what humans actually need, as Job affirms. Can God offer any response here, beyond a lesson about the incomprehensibility of the divine for human beings? Certainly we should not expect a theodicy as a full explanation of God's purposes for human hardship, as if we were in a position to identify and understand those purposes fully. Job learnt this lesson the hard way.

The Bible suggests that God allows, and even creates, hardship and overwhelming negative experiences for humans for various reasons, but always against a background of God's good purposes. So this does not entail God's doing evil. If God's purposes in allowing and creating human hardship (even including judgment) are consistently good rather than bad, then we may speak of them as being broadly *creation-enhancing*.

A creation-enhancing act intended for good need not be an act that brings salvation or divine reconciliation; creation-enhancing goodness is broader than an act of salvation. Even if God seeks human salvation, it

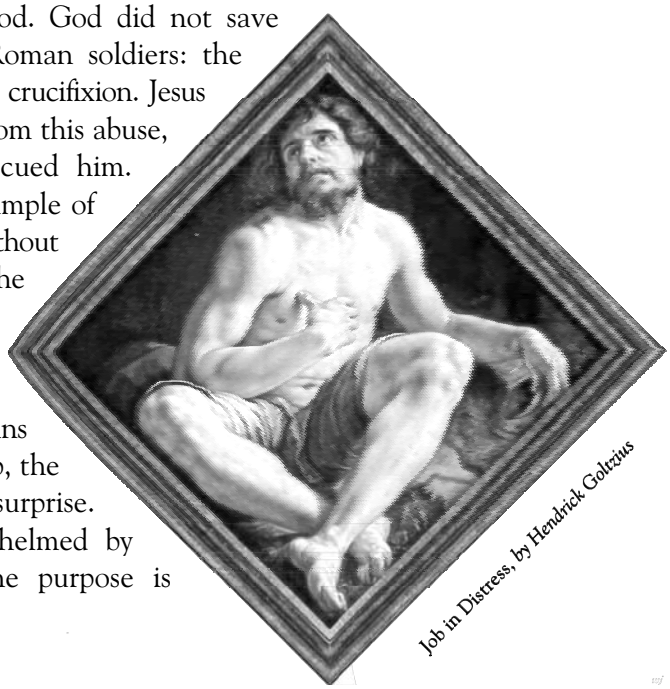
[1] On such hiding, see Paul Moser, *The Elusive God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), and Moser, *The Severity of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).

[2] Karl Rahner, 'God is Far from Us', in *The Content of Faith*, edited by Karl Lehmann, Albert Raffelt and Harvey Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 216 220, here 218. See also Rahner 'Images of God', in *Content of Faith*, 211 212.

does not follow that God does *only* what will, or even aims to, bring about salvation as reconciliation to God. Part of the divine aim is to manifest the creatureliness of human beings before God, including creaturely need, often when they are ignoring or resisting being creatures before God. The acknowledgement of human creatureliness can be a path towards reconciliation with God, but it does not automatically go in that salvific direction. A human's will can block reconciliation to God, even if God wreaks hardship among humans in order to manifest human creatureliness with a creation-enhancing intention. So, we do well not to try to domesticate God or think of God as docile in showing casual 'niceness' towards humans.

God can move beyond mere creation-enhancing to the overwhelming of human beings, in order to manifest human inadequacy and curative need as redemptive need. Without causing bad overwhelming experiences, or any other evil, God can use such overwhelming to bring people to face their creatureliness before God. In doing so, God may forgo the immediate rescue of humans from their hardship for the sake of (deepening) their acknowledged dependence on God. So, a curative process from God can leave humans with real hardship that has no quick fix. We have no reason to assume that such a process must be easy or fast for us.

God can use the human crucifixion of Jesus to overwhelm many people, including Jesus himself, who sought to identify with other humans in their feeling forsaken by God. God did not save Jesus from the abuse of the Roman soldiers: the mocking, scourging and death by crucifixion. Jesus received no divine protection from this abuse, although God could have rescued him. (Job also serves as a salient example of someone undergoing suffering without a quick rescue by God, as does the apostle Paul—see 2 Corinthians 4:8–11.) If, for a curative purpose, God wanted Jesus to represent and identify with humans in their predicament of hardship, the lack of a swift rescue is no surprise. Human beings may be overwhelmed by God, then, even if the divine purpose is obscure.



Job in Distress, by Hendrick Goltzius

From Overwhelming to Faith and Agapē

An idealized and oversimplified path from being overwhelmed by God to faith in God takes this form:

1. overwhelming experience of God →
2. perplexity about the overwhelming experience →
3. the self is displaced from presumed control over the situation →
4. psychological room is created for self-revelation of God to the person as a creature of God →
5. opportunity to receive God as God through faith.

The human story of interaction and struggle with God is rarely, if ever, this straightforward, but steps 1–5 do emerge from human stories under different descriptions.[3]

An enduring faith in God demands a human resolution of the will to resist falling into despair while being overwhelmed by God. Such faith goes beyond assenting to the intellectual content of statements, because it engages the human will to let God be God, particularly in overwhelming human beings. It also includes hope in God's somehow bringing good out of a negative overwhelming experience. Faith in God is irreducible to knowledge about God or belief that God is such-and-such. It ideally includes evidence, knowledge and belief regarding God, but is not reducible to any or all of these. Faith in God includes a resolute human venture towards a future with God as Lord. It thus differs from mere knowledge or belief regarding God, and it figures in a curative process in which it becomes a direct avenue to the reception of divine love (*agapē*) as redemptive for humans.

Faith in God is exclusive in its resolve to let God *alone* be Lord and God in *all* things, even where this involves our being overwhelmed or experiencing hardship. Despite human failures in practice, there must be no exceptions to this, lest God be denied as Lord and God. Idolatry, with its lesser gods, is a constant threat, offering apparent sources of

[3] For an illuminating treatment of perplexity in relation to divine incomprehensibility, see Karl Rahner, 'Christian Pessimism', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 22, translated by Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 155–162, and compare Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, translated by W. V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 403–409.

authority and power that are alternatives to God. The resolve of faith requires human willingness to die to the authority of other powers, for the sake of living for just one ultimate Power. This is the heart of monotheistic faith, and it is clearly more robust, demanding and adventurous than mere belief or knowledge that something is the case. Faith in God concerns the authoritative power for which we live and die.

The salient and ever-present test of resolute faith in God for all human beings (and not just Jesus) is Gethsemane. This is the place of ultimate decision about the priority of God's will for Jesus, and for others. Jesus himself set the standard there with his ultimate resolve to let God alone be God, even faced with his anticipated crucifixion by the Romans. Having linked life with God with human death (Mark 8:34–35), Jesus prayed, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36). The final clause is the hallmark of how Jesus relates to God, and it emerges as a standard for all people in relating to God as God.

Gérard Rossé observes that the obedient response from Jesus 'release[s] the unfolding of the passion', and is 'for the evangelist the key to all that is about to happen, a warning to read all that follows in this light'.[4] Crucially, Jesus puts God's will and power above his own to the very end, even to the extent of feeling forsaken by God and dying on the cross. Rossé adds:

> At the moment in which he appears forsaken, he is identified more than ever with the divine will …. And in this weakness without end, Jesus finds himself 'delivered' without reserve to the Power of the Father, totally open to the creative act of the resurrection.[5]

So, Gethsemane can illuminate the obedient, kenotic attitude that led to Jesus' cry of forsakenness, his death, and his subsequent resurrection as his being 'delivered without reserve' to God.[6] In subjecting his own will to God, Jesus made room for the priority of God's will in his life. This kind of subjection is crucial to the curative process offered by a God worthy of worship. It lets God be God in this process.

A key lesson from a curative God emerges in the phrase 'in this weakness without end', which includes the Gethsemane weakness of

[4] Gérard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross*, translated by S. W. Arndt (New York: Paulist, 1987), 63.
[5] Rossé, *Cry of Jesus*, 68.
[6] See Rossé, *Cry of Jesus*, 45, 102, and Rahner, 'God is Far from Us', 217, 219 220.

yielding fully to God's will, even in the face of death. The apostle Paul makes the most of this lesson in his Corinthian correspondence, where the significance of the crucified Jesus is at stake. Paul writes that 'he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Corinthians 13:4). This is a contrast between the weakness that Jesus accepts in his submission to God's will and power, and the resurrection power of God extended to the obedient Jesus (see Philippians 2:5–9). The relevant weakness, then, is accompanied by a distinctive power.

The strength of God's power is distinctive, and even paradoxical, relative to coercive powers, because it is the strength of self-giving love. It gives what is good, and does not take or coerce for selfish purposes. So, Paul remarks: 'God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Corinthians 1:25). This 'weakness' is seen in the *power* of the message of the cross; Paul is being ironic. Divine love may look like weakness to humans, but this is mere appearance. God's cruciform power, represented in Christ crucified, trumps human power, even though it must be received by humans in Gethsemane weakness.

Paul states the divine purpose for human weakness thus: 'we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us' (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul's notion of the power that 'does not come from us' bears on his understanding of God's curative challenge to human self-trust and lack of reliance on God. He says: 'we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:9). Paul regards God as seeking to undermine human self-trust that does not yield to trust in God.

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, *by Eugene Delacroix*

The distinctive power of God, including resurrection power, is *sui generis* and not to be confused with what mere humans have to offer on their own. The contrast with human weakness puts this lesson

in sharp relief, emphasizing the uniqueness of the divine power needed by humans. We may prefer the idea of a divine supplement to enhance or approve our own power and will, but neither Gethsemane nor Calvary allows for any such easy compromise. God may not be subordinated to the provision of human power: God would cease to be God, and human power would rule over divine power.

Paul ties together his observations about faith, divine power (or grace), suffering, and hope, as follows:

> Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love [*agapē*] has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1 5)

Faith in God, according to Paul, gives humans access to God's power (which includes the distinctive power of divine grace, God's active love), because the resolve of faith gives that power exclusive authority, as Jesus did in Gethsemane and on the cross. Our having this treasure in 'clay jars' shows that it does not come from us. It must come from God, and human faith in God is the means to receive it directly. This faith, however, also brings suffering, given the world's opposition to it, but the suffering can serve God's good purpose for human beings. It can contribute to an enduring character that abides in hope in God, especially hope in God's sustenance in suffering, as an alternative to the world's despair. So, God's power can be curative even in a context of human suffering.

Paul observes God's self-manifested reality in the unique power of love that God has given his people of faith through his Spirit. God's distinctive power is, in Paul's account, the present reality of the curative renewal of humans through divine love, and it anchors and ratifies human faith and hope in God, removing the disappointment of despair. This power, faith and hope in God offer a positive alternative to speculative or wishful thinking, an affirmative human response to the divine power available in human experience. If we hold that faith and hope in God are a gift from God, we still should acknowledge a human role in the reception of that gift.

Paul speaks of a present human renewal that anticipates resurrection: 'Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being

renewed day by day' (2 Corinthians 4:16). Timothy Savage refers to this as 'the *present* experience of future resurrection'.[7] A related idea emerges in Romans 6:13, where Paul encourages the Roman Christians to 'present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life', by means of the power of God. An adequate characterization of faith and hope in God must acknowledge their anchor in the present reality of God's life-giving power of love. Without this anchor, they are counterfeits, unable to weather the overwhelming hardships of human life and death or to contribute to curative renewal from God.

God's curative renewal in love is at the heart of Gethsemane and the cross. Rossé explains:

> If the Father had intervened before the death, if he had interrupted the experience of abandonment with an act of power before it was fully finished, an abandonment which for Jesus meant complete, unlimited gift of himself, he would have limited the love of Jesus for him, he would not have allowed him to express his filial relationship, his being Son, to the full. But by this very fact, he would not have been fully Father.[8]

Jesus acknowledges God—even 'my God'—in his experience of God's apparently forsaking him, thus suggesting that a present experience of God is secondary to a loving relationship with God, which need not include present experience.

Rossé concludes:

> The abandonment, then, reveals to a maximum degree the being of God: Love. One understands what an upset such a fact must have been for the common mentality, for philosophy, and even for the behavior of those who were already 'following Christ'.[9]

If this love is central to what Abraham Heschel calls the motivating '*pathos*' of God, and humans are to share in this *pathos*, then the love represented by the cross should be an abiding motive in all human action (see Philippians 2:5–9). *Pathos* here is no mere intellectual belief; instead, it is a passionate commitment that moves an agent to act passionately under certain circumstances. Gethsemane and the cross, then, define the life of faith in God, particularly its distinctive motivating power that seeks to be curative for humans.

[7] Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 182, citing Morna Hooker, *Pauline Pieces* (London: Epworth, 1979).
[8] Rossé, *Cry of Jesus*, 136 137.
[9] Rossé, *Cry of Jesus*, 139, and compare Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 187 188.

What does this tell us about the human failure to have faith and hope in God? This failure can emerge in various ways, as suggested by the parable of the sower, but we can identify a common shortcoming: human failure to enter the 'weakness without end' in which God's power alone guides and presides. Jesus entered this weakness with genuine struggle at Gethsemane, but many humans refuse to follow, thereby resisting the curative renewal God offers. This renewal depends on humans struggling to submit their wills to God's will and thereby to cooperate with God.

Perhaps we have, in part, a failure of human courage, as Rahner suggests in relation to the courage of Jesus in committing himself to God.[10] Correspondingly, we may suspect human fear to be at work, including the fear of missing out on something sought, even something good. In this perspective, the main challenge to faith in God is not intellectual doubt but rather fear of Gethsemane, including the fear of not satisfying our own settled preferences about what we want (perhaps wealth, a long life, and plenty of worldly power). Such fear can include the concern that God is not genuinely good and hence will fail to supply or protect what we find good.

Fear aside, we may simply fail to see or find a curative God at work in human weakness, or in the kind of overwhelming experience that creates human hardship. We may doubt the reality of God in this connection, on the ground of lack of evidence. Some fail to see a curative God's involvement; others do see it. The difference is clear, but resists quick explanation. Perhaps some *want* to see, whereas others do not, given that human authority over ourselves, particularly over our wills, is at stake.[11] Augustine offers a blunt approach:

> Why does [someone] not see God? Because he has not love itself. That he does not see God is because he does not have love; that he does not have love is because he does not love his brother. The reason then why he does not see God is that he has not love. For if he had love, he would see God, for 'love is God'.[12]

Even if this is true of some people, however, it does not easily generalise to all who fail to see a curative God at work. Timothy Savage has suggested

[10] Rahner, 'God is Far from Us', 219; and see Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, translated by J. M. Demske (Westminster, Md: Newman, 1960), 56.

[11] See John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia UP, 1956), 140 142.

[12] Augustine, Tractate 9, on 1 John 4:17 21, n. 10, in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 112 24; Tractates on the First Epistle of John*, translated by John W. Rettig (Cincinnati: Catholic U. of America P, 1995), 259.

that some fail to see God 'because the new life comes to expression in the humility of faith, a trait viewed with scorn by those absorbed in the self-exalting outlook of their day'.[13] Intentional resistance to the weakness involved in faith can cloud human apprehension of its value in relation to God's curative power of love.

A central aim of the divine overwhelming of human beings is to contrast human power in its inadequacy with the alternative, life-giving power of God. Given that this divine power is *sui generis* in its overwhelming of humans and is crucial to who God is, we may say that God is overwhelmingly other relative to humans. It does not follow, of course, that God is *wholly* other, because humans may share in the image of God, having been made in that image. The divine power at work in Gethsemane and the cross show God's being overwhelmingly other. The love demanded in volitional weakness relative to God's will is no divine–human hybrid. Instead, it is uniquely divine, and it underwrites human faith and hope in God. Such faith is to be energized, or empowered, by God's love (Galatians 5:6).

God is overwhelmingly other relative to humans

Let us assume that God is overwhelmingly other in God's unique power of love, and that this love can be apprehended and received only in the weakness of human faith towards God. In that case, human neglect or disregard of this weakness will result in failure to apprehend the power of God and thereby Godself. Faith in God does call for evidence for God's reality and goodness, but this evidence arises for a person, at least in a salient way, in response to a human experience of God's self-manifested curative love.

From Gethsemane to Dereliction and Beyond

In the Gethsemane story in the synoptic gospels, Jesus prayed as though God could have changed the redemptive plan. The use of 'must' in 'the Son of Man must suffer' (Mark 8:31) is not that of absolute necessity; instead, it is the 'must' of a requirement in God's initial plan. That plan haunted Jesus at Gethsemane, at least for a time, and led to his prayer for an alternative. Perhaps he thought that God could provide a way to avoid the scandal, the desolation and the dereliction of the cross. Even in John's Gospel, the thought of an alternative crosses Jesus' mind, if only briefly (John 12:27).

[13] Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 186.

Perhaps the most troubling question here is: why did God say 'No' to Jesus? The problem with this question is that it fails to capture the complexity of the situation. Arguably, God did not really say 'No', because Jesus quickly changed his prayer, dropping his initial request and yielding, in agreement, to what God had asked of him. We can acknowledge the difference between an initial request (perhaps under stress) and a settled request (perhaps upon reflection). Arguably, 'take this cup from me' (Mark 14:36) was an initial, unsettled request made under stress, and God would have known this. Jesus' settled response was 'Father, let Your will be done', and God knew this, too. (In John's Gospel, the settled response is 'Father, glorify Your name'; John 12:28.) The first, unsettled request shows us that Jesus was human, and his decision to identify himself with other humans in suffering, death and felt abandonment by God (to demonstrate God's love for them) would have been traumatic to him as human—perhaps overwhelming.

Rahner has suggested that we can follow Jesus in Gethsemane,

> … *if* we pray with the Son, and, in the weary darkness of our heart, repeat his prayer in the garden. In pure faith. No storm of rapture will spring up, when his words mysteriously rise up somewhere in the depths of our hearts as our own words. But their strength will suffice. For each day it will be just enough. So long as it pleases God. And this is enough.[14]

This is indeed the Gethsemane weakness of faith, but it flourishes by the overwhelming power of its unique object, the living God whose unmatched power emanates from Christ crucified. The remaining question is whether humans are willing to let that God alone be God in their otherwise fragile lives.

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[14] Rahner, 'God is Far from Us', 220.