

“What’s Good about Feeling Bad?” is the most thorough treatment of pain and suffering I have ever seen. With the skill of a reflective person who has been there, Thomas and Habermas lead the reader through a thoughtful, practical, sensitive journey through no less than fifteen different aspects of suffering. The book closes with a powerful set of guidelines for working through life’s hardships. This book is not only brimming with practical guidance, but its breadth of analysis will also offer the teacher and scholar much food for thought when grappling with the problem of evil at a theoretical level.”

J. P. MORELAND

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology,
Biola University; author of *Kingdom Triangle*

“Ever ask God why? We all have. *What’s Good about Feeling Bad?* helps you wade those waters. With a solid biblical foundation, you’ll discover how God uses suffering to benefit and bless us all. Best of all, it will help you understand how to answer the difficult questions and comfort others as Christ Himself has comforted you.”

DR. TIM CLINTON

President, American Association of Christian Counselors

“Forged in the furnace of trials and hardships, this book is both a brilliant examination of suffering from a Christian perspective and a practical handbook that guides the reader through God’s purposes and promises for the formidable journey. Learn through its pages how God can use pain and suffering in your own life as means of grace for personal transformation.”

CHAD MEISTER

Director of philosophy program, Bethel College; author of *Building Belief*

“John Thomas and Gary Habermas have wrestled with the issue of pain and suffering and now share what they have learned, providing a wealth of practical steps for dealing with the unpleasant situations in which all of us at times find ourselves.”

MICHAEL LICONA

New Testament historian, North American Mission Board;
author of *Paul Meets Muhammad*

“As a psychologist leading a ministry to the separated and divorced, I found *What’s Good about Feeling Bad?* to be a valuable addition to my recommended reading list. John Thomas and Gary Habermas have given us a compassionate but realistic overview on handling the difficulties we face. While most want to ‘get on with life’ as quickly as possible, this book encourages the reader to see God in this process and to use each experience for spiritual and personal growth. I found the book to be insightful and encouraging.”

THOMAS WHITEMAN, Ph.D.

President, Fresh Start Seminars

WHAT'S
GOOD
ABOUT
FEELING
BAD?

*Finding Purpose and a
Path through Your Pain*

John C. Thomas • Gary Habermas



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JOHN'S DEDICATION

To my beautiful and amazing wife, without
whose support, love, and grace I would not
be able to fulfill my God-given call in life.
Katie and Stephen, thanks for bringing joy and
excitement into my life.
To the glory of God!

In loving memory of
Nathaniel David Sours
December 2, 1991, to June 7, 1998

GARY'S DEDICATION

With much love to our nine grandchildren:
Austin, Madelynn, Ethan, Kaitlin, Jackson,
Hannah, Tyler, Lilly, and Elam

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Melt in the Mouth

A headache—the kind that takes up residence behind your eyes and throbs with the rhythm of your pulse—overtakes you. Seeing you squint, your boss asks if you are feeling well.

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you.” You rationalize that it really isn’t so bad, that you’ve had worse—although you can’t really remember when and don’t really care. You have other things on your mind, namely the mess you will face tomorrow if today’s work is left undone. You manage to remain conscious through your boss’s rant, muttering “That’s interesting,” and “Of course, I’ll get right on that,” at the appropriate moments. You are dismissed just in time for lunch, where you settle for your daily ration of over-the-counter painkillers, each branded with the recommendations of “Four out of Five Doctors,” and each promising instant relief. Unfortunately, your headache fails to confirm the claims on the label and you begin to wonder about the fifth doctor. Barely managing to muddle through the rest of the afternoon, you hobble home, pull the shades, and retreat into the darkness, hoping that the combination of sleep, silence, and luck will make the unbearable pain subside.

Now suppose that the pain is not centered in your head, but in your heart—the kind that comes from betrayal or loss. On the surface, the two may be similar. When asked if you are feeling well, you would most likely reply with the same “Yes, I’m fine, thank you” that you gave to your boss. And as you did with the headache, you might rationalize your grieving heart by minimizing the pain, medicating it, or hiding it—or most likely some combination of all three. Unlike your headache, however, heartache isn’t so easily dismissed, and its pain can be (and usually is) much more severe.

As a college student, I (John) experienced heartache when I was rejected by my fiancée. In the deepest recesses of my pain and emotional poverty, I remember a good friend putting his arm around me

and saying the most profound words I had ever heard: "I guess you are gonna really hurt for a while." My initial response was "Duh!" But weeks later, as I considered his words, I realized there was much to what he said. My friend's comment had conveyed three truths that provided encouragement during that heart-wrenching time.

First, he reminded me that it was "gonna really hurt." In other words, what I was feeling at that time was normal and, in its own peculiar way, proper. It was comforting to know that I was not heading down the road toward insanity. My feelings of loneliness, rejection, and grief did not indicate weakness, but rather the fact that I was a human being who experienced human emotions.

Second, his words "for a while" communicated that although I would hurt and hurt badly, I could take comfort in the fact that there would be an end to this turmoil. The winter in my heart would pass and yield to the promise of spring. I did not know the timetable for when or how it would lessen, but I knew that eventually, somehow, the sting would fade.

Finally, my friend's comment assured me that he knew how deeply I hurt. This was perhaps the greatest comfort. In a time of utter isolation, I had someone with whom to share the hurt. Of course, there was no way he could fully understand my internal chaos, but merely knowing that he sensed my pain was enough.

Perhaps you are agonizing over a wayward child or living with the sorrowful reminders of bad decisions. You may have learned that a loved one is terminally ill or anguished over the untimely death of a family member. Maybe you have lost your job or your dreams have been shattered. Perhaps your past has been marked by the dreadful reality of sexual abuse or the chaos of an alcoholic home. Maybe you have lost your home and all your possessions in a flood or hurricane. Or maybe your future has been radically altered by a spouse's decision to leave or the irresponsibility of a careless driver. A multitude of things in life can harm us and steal our joy. Regardless of the reason, our experiences with suffering all share one common denominator—the pain is beyond description. It doesn't matter whether you brought it on yourself or not. It doesn't matter if your response to the circumstances is common

or not. Whatever the case, the ache of suffering still screams out for relief.

A quick reading of the Old Testament reveals many examples of the children of Israel crying out to the Lord. As slaves in Egypt they continually called out to God for deliverance, yet year after year passed with no answer to their prayers and no reprieve from their bondage. Eventually, the harsh reality that no relief was coming hardened their disillusioned hearts. God had turned His back on them. He had neglected His own children for no apparent reason. Or so it seemed.

But God *had* heard them. What the people of Israel did not understand was that mere men could never hinder God's plan and that their increasing affliction was also part of that plan. According to His own timetable, God prepared and sent Moses to liberate the people from Pharaoh's oppression. And at just the right time, He turned their cries of desperation into songs of celebration as the jubilee of freedom rang through the streets of their city. No longer did the future seem to be a bleak continuation of the past. They had hope for a new life as they prepared to embark upon an unknown, but welcome, journey.

This festivity was short-lived, however. They had barely begun their journey when trouble started. Some of the Israelites had developed such a negative outlook on life that they criticized Moses at every opportunity. In fact, on one particular day when they were hungry from their travels, some of them accused Moses of rescuing them only to let them die in the desert. Now, rather than defining their suffering as being in bondage, they pointed to the poverty of their provisions. Who could question their logic if they had said, "If God is trying to help, get Him to stop!"

The real problem for the children of Israel was not their circumstances but their attitude, which led them to test God.¹ In spite of their grumblings, the Lord graciously provided water from a rock. Whether the Israelites were in Egypt or the desert, their perception of their circumstances blinded them to the grace of God, and they melted under the heat of hardship. As slaves in Egypt they had cried out in anguish to God. But in spite of their pleas for deliverance,

their suffering continued. Yes, God did deliver them, but *in His time*. Then, just when they thought they could trust Him again, it seemed that God had abandoned them once more. “Where is God?” they shouted. Time and time again, they allowed affliction to distort their perception of God. Though led by the pillar of cloud and fire, they neglected to truly follow God with their hearts. Put yourself in their sandals for a moment. As difficult as it is for us to admit sometimes, we often struggle with the same questions the Israelites had: Where is God? Why is He allowing me to suffer? What did I do to deserve this? Indeed, the questions are sometimes so unsettling that we begin to doubt the goodness of God. One philosopher concluded, “If there is a God, surely He is the devil.” In other words, if God is in control of the universe, He must be evil to put His own children through such misery, adversity, and affliction. The Bible says that God is a loving Father,² but what kind of father would see his children hurting and do nothing? The only logical conclusion would be that God must not care. Maybe He is too consumed by His personal business to give us any attention. Whatever the case, our suffering continues.

A Tale of Two Realities

The Diet Mountain Dew was a perfect chaser for my (John's) midnight snack of spicy buffalo wings. With my tummy full, I searched for the remote while comical M&M's danced across the television screen to the confident and cheerful refrain, “Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.”

I stumbled to bed and snuggled down into my favorite feather pillow. My stomach began to rumble and turn over and over as the commercial slogan became a sweet lullaby to my tired mind and nauseated gut. Soon I drifted off into a dreamy world where I found myself in boot camp. But this wasn't just any military camp. By now the commercial tune had taken on an army cadence, and to my amazement, I was a peanut M&M!

As a green recruit, I struggled to keep up with the other enlisted candies as we were put through our paces. The drill instructor, or DI as we called him, bullied our mission into us. On command,

we trainees bellowed in unison, “Melt in the mouth, not in the hand, *sir!*”

The DI was brutal throughout our training, pushing us to exhaustion and calling into question our ability to succeed—whatever it took to hone our skills and prepare us for our mission. All the while, he told of veteran M&M’s who endured the heat of battle without failing in their duty.

With pronounced bravado and a strong sense of optimism, I graduated boot camp and was dispatched to fulfill my orders—“Melt in the mouth, not in the hand!” Finally, the moment of truth had come. The bunker was ripped open, and we were thrown onto the battlefield. As we rapidly attempted to form ranks, I braced myself for what was ahead. But before we could fall into position, we were thrust into darkness as a hand closed over us.

This doesn’t make sense, I thought. *It is not supposed to work this way!* I mustered all my determination to stay cool and calm as the heat of battle intensified. Eventually, my resolve evaporated into overpowering dread as I realized I was melting. I had failed to carry out my orders. In that moment of panic, I awoke in a cold sweat.

Though this tale was nothing more than a strange dream, it illustrates an all-too-familiar struggle. As Christians, we are indoctrinated with the message that we are to trust God in the midst of hardship and endure as good soldiers. With the fervency of drill instructors, some ministers dogmatically preach that we are to bear trials with joy, thanksgiving, and an assured peace. We are expected to be heartened by the hope-filled words from Romans 8:28 that God works out everything for good for those who love Him. Whether the message is in sermon, song, or script, our orders are clear: Trust God. Hang on to your faith. Be joyful.

Yet these orders seem to pose an impossible challenge. Our hearts say something radically different. Logically, we accept the truth of the Bible. We know that God is in control and that He is good. We believe that He is trustworthy and faithful. But there is the other reality of our emotions, which make it really tough to smile and praise the Lord in the midst of tragedy.

While some Christians struggle to maintain their composure

under pressure, others cannot make sense of God allowing us to suffer in the first place. When we see suffering, or more particularly, *experience* suffering ourselves, the hard reality of the pain nags us to question how God could allow so much hurt. Where is His protection? Why didn't He rescue us? How could He have let something so unfair happen? We conclude that God can't be good or loving, or trustworthy or faithful, because if He were those things He would have protected us from unnecessary pain.

On the other hand, if He is good, suffering must be a punishment for some hideous sin. A pervasive sense of shame and guilt begins to move in as we wonder, *What did I do to deserve this pain?*

It is extremely difficult to reconcile the realities of God and suffering. One reality has to be wrong. Either we must change our theology or we must deny the force of our emotions. For most of us, the reality of our hearts rings louder and truer. Instead of sensing joy and peace, we are confused, angry, and despondent. And in the heat of battle, we begin to melt.

The Purpose of This Book

In this book we will examine the age-old question of why God allows His children to suffer. When I (John) shared with a friend that I was working on a book about suffering, he jokingly replied, "After reading what you write, people will know what true suffering is!" In his jest, my friend actually hit upon one of our goals: that you will have a better understanding of the pain you have or undoubtedly will endure in this life.

As we will show, suffering comes in many shapes and sizes, and it can serve many different functions in our lives, as well as in the lives of others. Similarly, God's responses and the type of relief that comes our way can also be quite varied. Having preconceived ideas about how God "must" act in a situation, particularly when we are all too ready to quote and claim Scripture, often leads to disappointment or even anger with God.

Sometimes God might deliver us *from* our suffering completely. Needless to say, this provides a certain type of relief. But on other occasions, He might hold our hands and walk with us *through* the

hurtful situation. Although it's natural to prefer the first response, there are times when the only way to gain blessing, insight, or growth is to face adversity. We must be willing to trust that God evaluates our circumstances differently than we do.³

Some of the clearest answers to the questions of suffering are spiritual in nature. Of course, no matter how hard we might search the Scriptures during and after a trial, we might never know why we suffer. Since God's ways are beyond our finite understanding, we may never wrap our minds around suffering. For that reason, our purpose in writing this book is not to give glib or neatly packaged answers to the mystery of suffering. It is too complex a problem for pat answers. Our goal is simply to use His Word as a guide in an attempt to bridge the great divide between despair and hope. We hope that it will deepen your understanding of the will and purposes of God.

Once you've read through this book in its entirety, you can refer back to it again and again during times of suffering. As you grow in your understanding of what the Scriptures teach about pain and suffering and God's role in them, you can go back to the purposes and promises contained in each section. We've tried to organize the book so that you can easily review it in order to glean information for a particular circumstance or situation.

We've divided the book into three sections: "The Pain of Suffering," "The Purposes of Suffering," and "A Pathway through Suffering." The first section provides a basic theology of suffering and deals with the impact of pain on our lives. In section 2, we'll look at fifteen of God's purposes in suffering culled from the pages of Scripture. Within these fifteen purposes, we'll see that God's purpose is often to move the sufferer in one of four directions: inward, forward, outward, or upward. Finally, section 3 provides scriptural and practical advice for moving through suffering. If you are hurting, we resolutely pray that you will find direction and a road map to Christ through this writing.

As the authors of this book, we come at the issue of suffering from different, although complementary, angles. John is a professional counselor who has had vast experience in private practice

and corporate psychology. In his current occupation as a professor, he also directs a graduate counseling program. Although the details have been changed considerably (except where permission has been given), most of the examples in this book have been taken from John's many years of experience.

Gary is a former pastor, a distinguished professor, and an author in the areas of philosophy and apologetics. Over the past thirty years, his chief areas of study have been the questions of religious doubt and personal suffering. He has written several books on these subjects, in addition to having more than four hundred informal discussions with hurting individuals in the course of his study.

In the following pages, it is our prayer that you will come to see suffering, not as something to be avoided, but as a significant part of life. Although pain and difficulty are tied to our fallen nature, they can still be God's tools for transformation.

Moreover, we pray that you will come to the place in your spiritual journey where you not only expect suffering but learn to use it. If our desire is to be like Christ, we must persevere through suffering, seeing it as one of God's anvils to hammer out His image in us.⁴

SECTION ONE

THE PAIN OF SUFFERING

It is very unpleasant to consider the tragedies that could happen to us. Yet suffering comes to all without prejudice—the Christian and the non-Christian, the destitute and the prosperous, the weak and the strong. Jesus said that God sends the sun and rain on the just and the unjust.¹ Nothing will protect us from experiencing the suffering of this life, and when we are faced with the heartache of rejection, the emptiness of loss, the bite of physical pain, or the betrayal of being violated, pain is the natural result.

The reality is that this world is broken, cursed, and fallen. Pain, heartache, and adversity are to be expected. God's main objective is not that we live pain free, but that we are holy and acceptable in His sight. Our joy is not to come from the ease of circumstance, but from Christ who has overcome the world.²

In this section, we will examine the nature of pain and suffering. We all know that suffering is a reality that sometimes creates internal confusion and chaos. In order not only to face these conditions but also to grow through them, we'll need to begin by exploring some deeply held assumptions that cause us to feel suffering's sting to a greater degree.

The Perils of Pain

Dave and Teresa Sours were high school sweethearts who married shortly after graduation. Soon thereafter, they brought their first child, Ashley, into the world.¹ She was a blessing to her parents, and today Ashley is a nineteen-year-old blonde with a big smile and an even bigger heart.

Like most parents, Dave and Teresa looked forward with energetic anticipation to the birth of their second child. In the twentieth week of pregnancy, however, they were told that their unborn baby boy had a very serious medical condition. Three choices were offered to them: do nothing, which would result in the inevitable death of their baby; abort the child; or allow a potentially dangerous and experimental surgery to be performed on the unborn child. Even if the surgery was successful, there was no way to assess the extent of damage already done to the baby's tiny lungs and whether or not they would be able to support life. Further testing revealed that their baby had only a one in four chance of survival. And if he did survive, he would probably suffer significant brain damage and deformities. With the odds against them, Dave and Teresa decided to do everything humanly possible to give their child a chance to survive. They would risk the experimental surgery and leave the results in God's hands.

The operation was performed, but the results were inconclusive. Over the next few months, doctors closely monitored Teresa's pregnancy. Then on December 2, 1991, complications dictated an emergency C-section, and the delivery room was filled with

medical professionals ready to respond to the needs of a dangerously unhealthy newborn. There was complete silence—a combination of anxiety and fear—as the tiny infant was lifted from the open womb. Then the world's most beautiful sound filled the room as the tiny miracle child let out his first cry. Dave and Teresa gave him the name Nathaniel, which means “gift of God.” During the course of the following weeks, the doctors discovered that Nathan's brain was not damaged, nor were any deformities detected in his lungs. He had, however, sustained significant damage to his entire urinary system.

Nathan's care demanded much of her time, and it didn't take long before experience and research made Teresa a very medically astute caregiver. The next few years were spent dealing with frequent hospital stays, numerous infections, a number of surgeries and medical procedures, much blood work, and countless visits to the doctor. These were indeed trying times for the whole family. Their faith was shaken and hopes were dashed time and time again. And yet they repeatedly found the love of God and the common grace they needed to make it through the trials.

Over time, Nathan became more stable and was finally able to attend school to address his developmental delays. At two and a half years of age, he began attending an early childhood class, where he blossomed into a promising student.

Unfortunately, over the next several years, Nathan's already limited renal functions began to fail. It became evident that a kidney transplant was necessary. The Sours family became local celebrities as the community organized a “Nickels for Nathan” campaign to offset the expenses of the pending transplant surgery.

A persistent pattern of complications delayed the surgery, and in August 1997, peritoneal dialysis was begun. As the dialysis temporarily managed the kidney failure, preparations for a transplant continued. Dave was found to be the perfect match for Nathan, and as soon as Nathan was infection free, doctors planned to do the transplant.

The church organized daily prayer vigils to intercede for the family and physicians and to pray that God's will would be done.

Church members and friends prepared to help the family through Dave's one-month recuperation and Nathan's equally long hospital stay.

After years of anticipation, the day for the transplant finally arrived. The waiting room and hallway were filled with family and friends who gathered to await the outcome. After eight hours, word came that the surgery had finally been completed. Father and son were fine, and Nathan's new kidney was functioning perfectly. While Dave had a difficult postsurgical experience, Nathan amazed everyone with his smooth recovery.

Two days after the transplant at the University of Virginia Medical Center, Dave was in a wheelchair by his son's side and Nathan was using a remote control to find the Cartoon Network. I (John) went to visit them and was delighted to find them well. We laughed at sleepy Nathan's struggle to keep his eyes open and his treasured attempts to cuddle with his mother. After long hugs and encouraging words, I left with the promise to return soon. News quickly spread that Nathan and Dave were doing well, and we all gave thanks to God for His continued blessings in the life of this family.

When the telephone rang at four o'clock the next morning, I knew something must be wrong. Teresa's shaky voice confirmed my notion, and in the space of mere seconds, the joy we had all felt evaporated into fear.

"Nathan has taken a turn for the worse," she said. "The doctors are working on him, but they don't expect him to make it. We need you to pray."

"Oh, Teresa," I muttered. Years of psychological and theological training had provided me with no words of wisdom or comfort. "We will pray, and we will be there," I said. As I hung up the phone, I was still in a state of disbelief. Everything had been going so well. Only hours before we had praised God for what He was doing in and through Nathan, and now this!

That day at the hospital was a long one. At least thirty people sat on the floor or stood against the walls outside the pediatric intensive care unit. Apparently, Nathan had had a serious reaction

to one of the antirejection medications, which led to breathing difficulties. He was placed back on the respirator. Shortly after that, he had had a massive heart attack. The doctors worked passionately for over four hours to revive him. Unwilling to let him go, they put him on life support. Because artificial resuscitation does not efficiently provide oxygen to the brain, a neurological consultation was ordered. Unfortunately, the neurologist was unable to find any response. Hoping that medication might be hindering his ability to respond, the doctors decided to discontinue the medication and wait for four hours to see if Nathan would show any signs of neurological functioning. And so we waited, only in the end to be convinced of the worst. Late Sunday evening, on June 7, 1998, Nathan was pronounced dead.

Dave and Teresa's initial response was like that of almost anyone who has helplessly watched as their world unfurled around them: *Why? Why had God allowed Nathan to die?* It was as if a priceless string of pearls had suddenly broken and scattered across the ground, lost forever. The miracles that had caused Nathan to survive—and even thrive—during his short life brought glory to God and hope to His people. Certainly, God had many opportunities during the pregnancy to keep Nathan from being born and thereby absolve the family of such pain. What purpose could He have had in Nathan's death? Is such a purpose important enough to justify the agony that Dave and Teresa were experiencing or the loss that we all felt?

The Reality of Suffering

On a vacation once, I (John) learned of a cornfield maze the size of three football fields that had just opened to the public. Since it was patterned after Noah's ark, I joked with my family that going through it would be a "spiritual experience." So after being given a clue to help us navigate the maze, we excitedly entered the cornfield and began our quest.

As we wandered around the heavily trampled paths, I couldn't help but think of Stephen King's short story "Children of the Corn." Hopelessly lost in the maze of maize, we quickly found

that heat and fatigue were giving way to frustration. At times, we thought we were heading in the right direction, only to find ourselves face-to-face with people we had just passed. After taking time to regroup, we set out with a new strategy. But before we had traveled far, we met the same group of people again! My children began to wonder if they would ever get out, let alone find the next watercooler.

Suffering is much like being in a disorienting maze; it produces the confused and desperate feelings of being trapped. And we don't have to look far to see that suffering is a disturbing and inescapable reality that we all must face. At any time, tragedy can zero in on us and without notice turn the world upside down. Other times, suffering develops slowly over seasons, eroding away our resources until there is nothing left of us and the happiness we seek. Suffering comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Regardless of how we experience it and what wrapping it comes in, suffering always redefines our reality. To better understand this phenomenon, we need to examine six realities of suffering.

Reality #1: Suffering is universal

Until modern times, suffering was assumed to be a constant of life. Today, with improvements in medicine, radical advances in technology, and significant progress in so many fields of knowledge, suffering has come to be seen as an anomaly.

In spite of our accomplishments, the signature of suffering is written on every human heart. All people suffer, regardless of their race, gender, intelligence, financial status, or faith. A casual glance at the six-o'clock news or the daily paper provides ample evidence that people all over the world are experiencing hardships of many kinds. Since we live in a fallen world, the sources of pain and suffering are plentiful. Natural disasters, random accidents, and physical illnesses result in pain. Mental anguish, family dysfunction, and criminal behavior inject adversity into an otherwise peaceful life. Economic downturns, political unrest, and war bring distress, as does the fear that these things may befall us. Even the knowledge

that we cannot ensure our future or control our destiny brings about suffering with greater force.

Reality #2: Suffering is painful

Pain. Just hearing the word brings a feeling of discomfort. In fact, the word *trauma*, which means “wound,” uniquely captures the idea. There is nothing more central to the human experience than our capacity to feel, and no aspect of this is as deep as our capacity to suffer. To some degree, every person has experienced a wound or hurt. Yet as frequent as physical and emotional pain seem to be, we react as if trouble is unexpected and alien to our lives.

Sometimes there are no words to describe the excruciating pain that grips the soul. The agony is so intense it seems to envelop our entire existence. Pain can be like acid, rapidly eating away at us from the inside out. It's difficult to see beyond our own misery when we are consumed by the enormity of this kind of pain.

Emotional pain can also bring about a cascade of other symptoms: a loss of concentration, fatigue, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, profound sadness and depression, crying, agitation, and anger. Enduring such great pain would seem to be beyond the scope of normal human capability, and therefore it requires a supernatural Healer.

Suffering arouses pain and fear that are so intense that we naturally demand relief. The prophet Hosea saw this when he described God's people wailing upon their beds.² Sometimes the compounded effects of suffering produce a pain so intense that we feel desperate, wanting relief at any cost. When people are repeatedly traumatized—as hostages, victims of chronic family violence, or survivors of war atrocities—they may actually remain trapped in the trauma long after the events have ceased.

Reality #3: Suffering is personal

There is no correct way to suffer. Although certain aspects of human suffering are common, the experience is truly an individual process. Your reaction to pain is influenced by many factors, including the nature of the suffering, previous experiences with suffering, your personality and environment, and present circumstances. It is criti-

cal to remember that many of the situations that bring about suffering are outside the realm of normal experience, so there is no “normal” way to respond to them. Suffering is an intensely personal, privately lived, unique experience.

Of course, some people might have some notion of what you are feeling, especially if they’ve had similar experiences. But no one can fully grasp the reality of suffering in someone else’s life—the plaguing questions, the pain, and the ongoing battles that only you can understand.

But pain should not be experienced in a vacuum. Even when those around us don’t understand exactly what we’re going through, we can still share our hurts and our needs with family and friends who love us. Pain is personal, but that doesn’t mean it should be experienced in isolation.

Reality #4: Suffering is unnerving

The unnerving reality is that with one stroke of the clock, our worlds can turn completely upside down. From that one point in time, our minds, hearts, and bodies will never be the same again. In fact, research indicates that severe suffering can permanently change brain functioning. Seemingly cruel circumstances often leave us feeling stunned and blindsided, and we experience a shock to the system, a laceration of the soul, and a wound to the spirit.

In her book *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf struggles to define her pain as she writes, “For pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over chintz covers, interference with the sense of time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity in passing objects; and sounds very remote and then very close.”³

Despite our attempts to devise a world where we can predict, contrive, and control the outcome, we find that our best efforts most often fail and we’re reminded once again that life is beyond our control. We see the suffering of Christians who have perfect church attendance and seemingly perfect spirituality. However, the problems and turmoil they encounter seem to contradict their Christian lifestyle. How could such godly people experience such problems? To alleviate our confusion, we sometimes assume that

beneath the righteous public persona there lurks a dark side. It comforts us to believe that as long as we are as “good” as possible, their suffering will not befall us.

Suffering is also unnerving because few people have any preparation for or understanding about suffering. To some extent, the shock of any trauma is a function of its novelty and unexpectedness. Hence, the more unfamiliar the experience is and the more unprepared we are for it, the greater our shock and the greater our difficulties in working through the pain. In essence, we fear anything that is beyond our ability to control.

Suppose that you are driving down a road when you happen upon a severely damaged area of pavement. Having expected smooth sailing on your journey, you are not ready for such an obstruction. Your car bounces about as you slow your speed to accommodate the perilous pavement. You might complain about high taxes and miserable roadways. You might belittle the government officials who seem to ignore the problem. If, however, a road sign had warned you about the impending problem, you would have curtailed your speed in preparation for the road conditions. Of course, you would not like having to deal with such conditions, but knowing that it was coming, you would have had a very different emotional response. Yes, you would still feel the bounce and jostle as you crossed the rough patch, but having anticipated the trouble, you would have readied yourself for the experience.⁴

Reality #5: Suffering is mysterious

Suffering is a mystery, a puzzle for which we do not have all the pieces. Much like being in a disorienting maze, suffering produces the confusion and desperation of being trapped. Answers often seem to lie just beyond reach. Like a maze, it is difficult to find one's way out of suffering, and the inescapability of the pain can be overwhelming. Days seem to never end; the future is only an extension of the tormenting past. Hopelessness and despair often become our only companions. Our wills become paralyzed, constraining us to passivity. Although we yearn to feel normal again, we know normalcy is forever lost.

Initially, suffering produces a sense of disbelief. *This can't be happening to me*, we think. *There must be some mistake!* The experience feels unreal. It is more gratifying to swim in a vague sea of possibilities than it is to see reality clearly and face the deep hurts and fears of what is happening. Eventually, the unreality of the situation gives way to an overwhelming sense of bewilderment, and the suffering intensifies when it creates questions to which there are no ready answers. Confusion plagues the mind. Our gut-felt responses to suffering often override our theology. Our belief systems are undermined, and our faith is called into question. We doubt everything that we once believed about God. Oh, we know that He sent His only Son to die for us and that He has done miraculous things in our lives. But in the grips of confusing suffering, He is, in essence, only as good as His last benevolent action toward us.

Cries such as “Where is God?” and “Why is He not helping me?” seemingly fall on deaf ears. And when our faith in God is ruptured, we turn to our own reasoning in an attempt to make sense of the jarring turmoil. Such confusion is particularly disturbing when we believe that we do not deserve the ordeal. We are dumbfounded by the way things have turned out; it just doesn't make sense. *How did I get into this mess?* we wonder. *What did I do to deserve such misery?* We get caught up in the unending questions, but usually the repetitive, circular thoughts that bombard our conscious moments have no apparent answers. While God seeks to use suffering for our benefit, Satan seeks to use suffering to create doubts about ourselves and the character of God. He convinces us that God is treating us unfairly. So in order to find answers to unanswerable questions, we tend to fill in the gaps. For instance, some people choose to find fault in someone or something else: *He made me do it*, or *If I had different parents, this would never have happened to me*. Sufferers attempt to understand the problem by ascribing the problem to something beyond their control; that is, they believe that they are victims. By attributing our calamities to forces outside of ourselves, we hope to protect our sense of order and control.

Some sufferers seek to make sense of the event by blaming themselves. Taking responsibility for suffering puts control in our own

hands. But if this is only an attempt to make sense of the problem and not to resolve it, we end up feeling even more powerless. Of course, when we *have* brought about our own misery, we often become guilt ridden. Rather than having a God-given sorrow over sin that leads us to repentance and wholeness, we become intensely self-focused.⁵ Compare the different responses of Peter and Judas to their betrayal of Jesus. Peter became broken and repented, but Judas was so self-focused that he committed suicide. This tendency to become self-consumed leads to hopelessness because it keeps us in bondage to our failures. In the end, blame only compounds the problem and confuses us more.

Reality #6: Suffering is biblical

It should be no surprise that Jesus Christ suffered. His beatings and crucifixion were necessary in order for Him to accomplish His mission of redemption. The writer of Hebrews put it this way:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. . . . Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. HEBREWS 2:10; 5:8-9

These verses drip with truths about suffering. First, “it was fitting” for God to use suffering to perfect His Son. In other words, it is consistent with the character and nature of God to use pain and suffering to achieve His purpose. Jesus Christ became the perfect captain (literally, “leader” or “pioneer”) of salvation because God was willing to allow it. It seems almost sacrilegious to say that allowing suffering is consistent with God’s character. But before you turn your back on God, keep reading. Our goal is to know God; and if allowing us to suffer is indeed acceptable to Him, we must at least try to understand why.

Second, suffering teaches obedience. Pain taught Jesus Christ obedience to the Father and submission to His will. It is an amazing

thought to consider that Jesus, God Incarnate, could learn anything, but according to this verse, such was the case. Christ was not spared hardship and pain. Through suffering, He became our Redeemer, the High Priest who felt our infirmities, and through it He learned the costs of obedience. Moreover, because Jesus was wholeheartedly committed to do His Father's will, He willingly accepted pain as part of God's agenda. Perhaps there is no greater key to our ability to deal with suffering than to accept our circumstances and suffering as part of God's redemptive and transforming work in our lives.

Many of the early church fathers experienced suffering for the same reasons Jesus did.⁶ The litany of horrific circumstances that Paul experienced are genuinely valid reasons to moan: imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, and deprivation. But Paul simply accepted them as part of his Christian walk. In fact, in the book of Philippians, Paul was bold enough to say that he deeply wanted to know the "fellowship" of Christ's suffering. Like readers today, the recipients of that letter may have thought, *What is Paul thinking in saying that he wants to suffer?* We're sure, however, that Paul knew exactly what he was saying.

The great heroes of faith from the Old Testament typically earned their commendations through suffering.⁷ Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah were "put to death all day long" because of their faith.⁸ Certainly, these believers' testimonies run contrary to the notion that the Christian life is to be easy, convenient, and smooth sailing.

Suffering has no value in our economy, except for those who profit financially from the hardships of others. We do not like the inconvenience and pain that trials impose, but God values suffering. In His economy, suffering is a wise investment because it bears the potential for greater things. Like any investment, it carries with it risks, but God knows that the advantages far outweigh them.

The Bible makes clear that we can expect suffering. It cannot be avoided. We will hurt and be hurt. Pain will surround us. Though this sounds pretty bleak, there is hope. Though the basis of our

hope is in the past work of Christ on the cross, the realization of that hope is still in the future. God has assured us that His Son has overcome the world.⁹ The grip of death could not hold Jesus.¹⁰ In overcoming death, Christ defeated pain, sorrow, sickness, and suffering. Our hope rests in the truth that we will follow in His victory.¹¹

Jesus said that life would not be easy. But we can take confidence and find delight in the hope that we have in and through Him. Christ's triumph over Satan is cause to find peace. Because Jesus conquered pain, He can use our pain to accomplish His plan in and through us.

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Scripture itself, nothing is more valuable than hearing the experiences of those who hurt. After all, even much of the biblical content itself is concerned with the similar experiences of God's people. Making sense of this suffering is a difficult but necessary task, even in my own family. Watching my wife succumb to cancer at a very young age had a profound affect on my family and me. I continue to deal with these issues, as my young nephew was recently diagnosed with cancer. I have come to see that not only does God not promise us a "bed of roses," but God's Word repeatedly explains that suffering is more often than not the experience of God's own people, in both the Old and New Testaments. To miss this is to overlook a large percentage of the picture. As members of the body of Christ, we suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). As we approach the solution, it must be consistent with the clear and well-evidenced truths of Scripture.

Endnotes

INTRODUCTION: MELT IN THE MOUTH

1. Exodus 17:7
2. Psalm 100:5; 103:8; 1 John 4:16
3. Isaiah 55:8-9
4. Hebrews 12:11

SECTION 1: THE PAIN OF SUFFERING

1. Matthew 5:45
2. John 16:33

CHAPTER 1: THE PERILS OF PAIN

1. This story is used with the permission of Dave and Teresa Sours.
2. Hosea 7:14
3. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1931), 263.
4. I first heard this analogy from my friend and colleague Larry French, and I've found it very helpful in understanding the unnerving effects of suffering.
5. 2 Corinthians 7:10; Isaiah 1:18; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16
6. 1 Corinthians 12:23-28
7. Hebrews 11
8. Romans 8:36, NASB
9. John 11:25-26; 16:33
10. Romans 6:9-10
11. Isaiah 53:4; Hebrews 2:14-15

CHAPTER 2: THE BEDROCK OF SUFFERING

1. Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 5.
2. You may find similar ideas from the following sources: Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Melvin Lerner, "The Desire for Justice and Reactions to Victims: Social Psychological Studies of Some Antecedents and Consequences," in *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, eds. J. Maculay and L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1970); C. Parks, "What Becomes of Redundant World Models? A Contribution to the Study of Adaptation to Change," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 48 (1975): 131-37.
3. Psalm 14:3; 51:5; 58:3; Romans 3:23-24; 7:20-21
4. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 26.
5. Romans 8:21
6. Job 16:12-14
7. 1 Samuel 1:4-28
8. Corrie ten Boom, *Clippings from My Notebook* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1982), 56.
9. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Phoenix Press, 1985), 15. Throughout this manuscript we are not attempting to critique Scott Peck's controversial work and theories but to pull from his work concepts that are relevant to our points.
10. 1 Peter 4:12-13
11. Melvin Lerner, "The Desire for Justice and Reactions to Victims"; M. J. Lerner and G. Matthews, "Reactions to the Suffering of Others under Conditions of Indirect Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967): 319-25; M. J. Lerner and C. Simmons, "Observers' Reaction to the 'Innocent Victims': Compassion or Rejection?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4 (1966): 4, 203-10.
12. Ecclesiastes 8:14, NLT
13. Unless otherwise specified, all characters in the stories used in this book are composites of individuals.

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