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THIS BOOK CONSIDERS suffering in light of the sovereignty of our wise and loving God.¹ Since we believe that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28), we will ask, How does God intend suffering to work for his children's good? God doesn't waste the suffering of his children, so how does he use suffering? In what ways do we grow in suffering? How do we respond to suffering?

We begin with the quandary of suffering: Why is there pain and sorrow in the first place? We live in a world of hurt. It is a constant. If we were able to know for a split second all the hardship that people face in

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this world at any given time, it would probably drive us mad. Only God could take in such knowledge without going insane.

Today three thousand little children will die of malaria, most of them in Africa. There will be numerous mothers and fathers bereft by the loss of their children because of this one disease.

This year alone, 1.5 million people will die in Africa because of AIDS. Fifty million people die every year, many of disease, and most young and in agony. One hundred people have died since you began reading this book. Think of the pain their loved ones feel in the wake of those deaths.

A little closer to home, you yourself may be suffering because of family issues. Perhaps estrangement from a parent has haunted you all your life, leaving you with the longing for a father or a mother to say just once, "I love you, and I'm proud of you. You bring me great joy and delight." But it never comes.

Perhaps you are a parent loving and caring for your child, all the while that child is making self-destructive choices that will have disastrous effects on his or her future. As a parent, you are doing the best you can. You are helping and counseling, but ultimately, there is nothing more that you can do except watch and pray.

Maybe the problem is with your marriage. You would never have dreamed that your marriage would

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break up, yet it has. Sometimes it happens for reasons that are understandable, and other times not. Either way the heartbreak is unbearable.

Suffering is such a part of this life that there is no way we could even begin to touch on every possible scenario.

SUFFERING HAPPENS

We need to learn that suffering happens. Or more specifically, suffering is to be expected. It is the norm in this fallen world. Many people claiming to be Christian teachers say that suffering should not be happening to you. But the Bible and experience prove that suffering is the norm in this fallen creation. In the world that God originally made there was no suffering, but our world is filled with it because sin brought suffering in its wake.

Understanding that suffering happens is important, not only because there are some who tell us that suffering should not to be a part of the Christian experience, but also because we have, by and large, been spared many of the trials that the rest of humanity has had to face. For instance, most of us have never lived through a famine, but up until the twentieth century most people would have lived through a number of them.

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Since we live during a time in which some of the sufferings of this world have been mitigated for us, we are lulled to sleep sometimes and are surprised by suffering. When pain comes into our experience, our initial reaction is, “Oh, this shouldn’t be happening!” But if what I am saying is true (that suffering is, that suffering happens, that suffering is the norm for this fallen world), none of us should ever be surprised by suffering. Instead, when it comes our way, we ought to be saying: “I’ve been waiting and preparing for you. I knew you were coming, because this fallen world is full of the likes of you. I’ve been preparing, by God’s grace and by God’s Word, to glorify God as I experience you.” We must get it ingrained into our minds that suffering is an essential part of the Christian experience. You will suffer. That’s the first thing you need to know. The question remains, will you suffer in a way that honors Christ?

LEARNING TO SUFFER WELL

Christians need to learn to suffer well. In order to do so, we need to consider what the Bible teaches Christians to do in the midst of suffering.

Admiral Nelson won the great Battle of Trafalgar against the French during the Napoleonic Wars. The Viscount of Camperdown, who also won many battles

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during that period, was one of the admirals under Nelson. The Viscount of Camperdown's family crest had a ship with full sails on it and with two little Latin words: *Disce pati*—"Learn to suffer." That is precisely what Peter and Paul and Job and Moses and Jesus would say to you and me as believers in this fallen world. "Learn to suffer."

What do I mean by that? Let me put some feet on it by offering five things in particular you and I need to learn about how to suffer.

1. Magnify Jesus. You must learn to suffer in such a way that Jesus is magnified in your difficulty. If you do not approach suffering with a desire for Jesus to be magnified, then you will encounter some hardship in this world that will completely overwhelm you because of its magnitude. When you are facing a long and enduring struggle, you need to be equipped with something bigger to fight against it, and there is nothing bigger than the glory of Jesus Christ. Your desire to see Jesus magnified is one of your great weapons in the war against suffering. You must learn how to suffer in such a way that Christ will be great in your eyes and in the eyes of all who see your suffering.

2. Love him more. Learn to suffer in such a way that Jesus becomes more precious to you than before. If

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you endure suffering, and Jesus is not more precious to you on the other side, then your suffering has not yet come to full fruition. Every single experience, good or ill, is designed by our loving heavenly Father to cause us to prize Jesus Christ more and more.

3. Know that God is for you. You need to learn to suffer in absolute confidence that God is for you. But I should qualify this statement. If you are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation as he is offered in the gospel, you can endure suffering in absolute confidence that God is for you. Do not take my word for it. I am saying it on the authority of God's Word. You need to learn to suffer in full confidence that God is for you and that nothing can happen to you apart from his will.

Jesus made this point to his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount. Paul made this point to the suffering Christians in Romans 8. Peter made this point to the Christians who were getting ready to experience a great empire-wide persecution. You need to know that even in your darkest days God is still 100 percent for you. He is not against you, and everything that you need to endure, you already possess in Christ Jesus. But this truth is easier to say than it is to believe. It is easier to profess the truth than it is to rest in the truth during some difficult and dark time. But you need to begin a journey toward fully embracing it even in your darkest hour.

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4. *Rest on grace.* Suffering does not gain you acceptance from God. Learn to suffer knowing that you are accepted by grace through faith, apart from anything that you do either before or after your conversion. There are some people who, for a variety of reasons, seem to think that if they just endure enough suffering, God will love them a little more. Such a perspective fails to recognize that God has loved his people with an everlasting love and that acceptance by him is not a result of our deeds or our suffering. We are accepted only because of Christ and his work on our behalf; this is important for us to understand in the midst of suffering. During intense and long suffering, the mind can become numb and begin to think all sorts of crazy things. If there is even a hint of doubt in the back of your mind about how you stand accepted with God, Satan will use it to undermine your comfort and assurance as you face suffering.

5. *Embrace suffering.* Learn to embrace a life of suffering. Paul describes himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10a). If we are a band of brothers and sisters over whom the banner is unfurled and flowing, “Suffering, yet rejoicing,” there is no telling the gospel witness and effect it will have on the world around us. Talk about shaking the world out of its slumber—if we were a band of brothers and sisters in Christ dying yet living, suffering yet

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rejoicing, sorrowful yet full of inexpressible joy, what a comfort it would be to us, what a glory it would be to God, and what a witness it would be to the world. Be prepared to embrace a life of suffering.

BALM FOR THE SUFFERING SOUL

The good news if you are suffering today is that the Bible says so much about what you are going through. I've had the privilege—and I really mean *privilege*—of talking with many people in my church who have suffered through things that I have never experienced. During those times, if all I had to say to those individuals came from my own wisdom, books, or my meager experience, it would be utterly pathetic and depressing. But thank the Lord that you do not have to rely on my wisdom or common sense or experience, or anyone else's for that matter. Instead, the Word of God is waiting with wisdom and comfort for you in the midst of your difficulty. God has said much in his Word to you about your suffering, and it is my inestimable privilege of opening up his Word and saying, "Friend, look at the feast of help that God has prepared for you in his Word. It does not come from me! It does not come from my experience. It does not come from my wisdom. It comes from God!"

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Let me just give you some hors d'oeuvres of how much God says in the Bible about suffering. “Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies” (Nehemiah 9:27). God heard and answered their prayers in the midst of their suffering.

“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:3–5). Paul unveils the truth that believers are able to rejoice in their sufferings!

In Ephesians 3:13, Paul says to the dear Christians in Ephesus, who loved him so deeply, “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.” From this passage, I think I could prove to you not only that the suffering of the servants of Christ—those whom God has appointed as the ministers of the Word—is intended for the benefit of God’s people, but also that all of your sufferings, collectively, are meant for the benefit of one another. Your suffering, friend in Christ, is meant

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for the strengthening of your faith, as well as others around you. This means that we really do not want to miss anything that God intends for us to gain corporately through suffering.

Since Ephesians 3:13 is true, personal testimonies can be heartening in the local church. It is an enormous blessing to see the hand of God's grace at work in a fellow believer. God doesn't waste that suffering, and we should not either.

The book of 2 Timothy has a lot to say about suffering.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. (2 Timothy 1:8-9)

Paul is saying in effect, "Look, when somebody says, 'Since your Savior died on a cross and your apostolic hero is in prison, your religion must be false,' don't be discouraged. Don't be ashamed when you tell them that you worship a crucified Savior and that the minister you support is chained to a Roman guard." Paul also says, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ

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Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3); “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering . . .” (2 Timothy 4:5).

Or consider Hebrews 2:10: “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Jesus was made perfect through suffering? The heavenly Father has appointed the captain of our salvation to be made perfect through suffering. This is simply astounding.

The list continues. “As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10). “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (James 5:13).

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure? But when you do good and suffer for it, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:19–21)

Resist [the devil], firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will

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himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (1 Peter 5:9–10)

Those are just a few hors d'oeuvres of how much God has given to us in the Bible by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Isn't that comforting to you? We live in a world of constant suffering, but God has graciously spoken to us about it in numerous places in his Word.

One of the proofs that this is God's Word is that it says so much to us about suffering. The Lord cares about his children. Thus, he wants us to know the truth. He wants us to be comforted by the truth.

THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

The causes of suffering can be summed up in three words: sin, Satan, and God. The first can be subdivided so that we have four grand categories to explain why we experience suffering in this world: our sin, the sins of others, Satan's activity, and our sovereign God. Frequently, suffering is caused by not just one, but a combination of these categories.

For instance, in 1 Chronicles 21, David, the king of Israel, orders a census to be taken of the people. You might be tempted to think that this action is insignifi-

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cant. But God explicitly told the kings of Israel not to take a census. This was to remind them that Israel's security was not based on the number of fighting-aged males. Israel's security, rather, was based on God's protection. God wanted the king and all the people to trust in him alone and not in military might. David, however, breaks God's law and takes a census. This has dire consequences for the people of God. Tens of thousands of people end up suffering because of David's choice to have a census. First Chronicles 21:1 states, "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel." The author of Chronicles tells us that Satan was behind this temptation. So, the suffering that Israel experienced was the result of David's sin and Satan's activity.

But look at 2 Samuel 24:1-2:

Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people."

Wait a minute! Satan is the one who tempted David to take that census, and yet 2 Samuel says that God

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was angry with Israel and incited David to take the census. What's going on here? God is sovereign. Satan is active. Man is sinful. David does exactly what he wants to do. Satan does exactly what he wants to do. And God sovereignly appoints all things according to his own will. All of these things are a part of the suffering that was experienced in Israel.

Another example is from Job 1:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (verses 6–8)

In this passage, it is not Satan who comes to God and says, "Hey, I'd like to take out Job at the knees." Instead, God in effect says, "I see you've been roaming the earth. Let me mention somebody to you, somebody whom I love, somebody who loves me. His name's Job. Have you thought about him much, Satan?" Satan basically says, "Now that you mention it, I believe if

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he were ever afflicted and all the blessings that you've given him were taken away, he would curse you to your face, because you're not worth living for." God disagrees. And the rest is literally history.

In that great book of the Bible we are told that Job's sins have absolutely nothing to do with his trials. Sure, he struggled with sin and unbelief during his trials, but Job's sin had absolutely nothing to do with causing his trials. Satan was active in them, and God was sovereign over them.

As we think about the causes of suffering in this world, we first have to think about sin. There would be no suffering in this world if there were no sin. In Genesis 3:15–17, God says that pain and toil will come into this world because of Adam's sin. There would be no suffering in this world, were it not for sin, which is one of the great lessons of suffering. Always draw a line back from suffering to sin. The point is not necessarily that *my* suffering is because of something that I have done. Rather, in the face of suffering, learn to hate sin like we all hate suffering. This should be easy because there would be no suffering in this world had Adam not sinned.

Of course, much of the suffering in this world does result from our own sin. I suspect that most of the suffering I experience is the result of my own sin. Sometimes suffering is caused by personal sin, and

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sometimes it is caused by the sins of others. Sometimes suffering is the result of the work of Satan, but over it all, God is always sovereign.

When suffering comes knocking at your door, God does not take a step back and say, “You’re on your own. This is outside the sphere of my ability, competence, and sovereignty.” If that were the case, then in the very place where you need God most, he would not be there. It is much better to be left with the question in the night, “What in the world are you doing, Lord?” than to think, “You know, I cannot ask the Lord what he is doing, because he is not in this. I am on my own.” I would rather be asking, “What in the world are you doing, Lord?” than to think God can’t do anything about this because he is not in it.

Nowhere in the book of Job does he say, “Lord, couldn’t you help me here, but I know you can’t.” Rather, Job says in essence, “Lord, I know you are in control. Why are you doing this?” Job asks this because God is in charge of everything, which means that when we are experiencing suffering, we have Someone to whom we can turn. As much comfort as we may get from friends in this world—and we need all the comfort we can get—there is no one who knows our suffering like God. This book is about what he has to say to us in our darkest hours of need.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did humankind become subject to suffering (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:21)?
2. To what extent are we still affected by that original act (Romans 8:18–21)?
 - a. Be specific about its ramifications in human nature and even the physical world in which we live.
 - b. What kind of conditions exist not as the result of personal sin, but as a result of the fall?
3. Although difficult and even painful, not all suffering is bad. The greatest blessing for a person is not freedom from pain; instead, the greatest blessing is to be more like Christ. God can use trials and suffering to cause us to become more like his Son. What does Romans 8:28–29 teach us about understanding our experience of suffering?
4. Paul was no stranger to suffering. What can you learn from Paul’s autobiographical statements about his suffering (2 Corinthians 4:8–10; 12:7; Romans 5:3–5)?
5. There are many different reasons for suffering. As we have seen, some are the result of living in a fallen world, and not because of any particular action of our own. Sometimes, however, we bring

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suffering on ourselves. List some of the reasons given in these passages (Nehemiah 9:26–27; Psalm 107:17; Proverbs 11:24; 13:20; 19:15; 22:3; Jeremiah 13:22).

6. Jesus came into this world to defeat Satan and the effects of the sin that causes our suffering. Read Hebrews 2 and explain how he did that.