

Loving Well

(EVEN IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN)



William P. Smith

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WILLIAM P. SMITH



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To all those who have taught me so much
by gifting me with their love,
beginning with the One who loved me first.

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This book belongs to all of you in a special way.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.”

—Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

Escaping an Empty Way of Life

I stood outside, shivering in the cold, “talking” to God. *Venting* would be the more honest description. I had just thrown down the papers I was working on and stalked out of the room after unloading on one of my children, who had been repeatedly interrupting me every few minutes. My parting words were, “I am so frustrated right now. It doesn’t matter what I say or do, you don’t get it. It doesn’t matter if I speak gently to you. It doesn’t matter if I ignore you. It doesn’t matter if I explode! You just keep coming. I don’t know what to do with you.”

I hate those times. I have no interest in verbally bashing my kids, making them feel like I’m never satisfied with them. And yet, I also don’t want them to grow up believing that the world is all about them. What I’d just done wasn’t terribly loving (I get that), but in that moment I didn’t have any idea what else to do, so I ended up doing something that broke down the relationship instead of building it.

Ever been there? That place where, despite the fact that you

really do want to love the people around you, somehow it all goes south? Either you do something to shred the friendship or you face something you don't know how to handle. You've tried everything you do know, and nothing seems to help. As a pastoral counselor, I have lots of friends who share those feelings.

Friends like Tasha and Maurice. Tasha is unhappy with her job and would really rather stay home with the baby, only they can't afford to have her do that. So every time she comes home, she complains to Maurice about how bad work was.

Maurice, however, doesn't know what to do with her complaints. His preferred role of being the funny, lighthearted guy just doesn't seem to work like it used to with her. So he prefers to switch on the TV during dinner and watch it into the night, or play card games with her, or do some other activity that safely insulates him from an intimidating conversation.

She likes him, but feels alone and abandoned. So guess what she does about her loneliness? She complains about it, adding it to the complaints about her job. And when she complains, he feels more helpless and confused, so he finds new ways to ignore her. And 'round and 'round they go. You wouldn't say he's a bad man or she's a miserable woman, but they don't know how to engage each other in a helpful way.

Most of the time, my friends and I don't set out trying to hurt anyone, especially those we really care about. We're relational creatures, made in the image of the great communal, three-in-one God. We long for relationships. Intentionally undermining our closest relationships would be counterproductive to our whole nature and desire. And yet we do just that. We watch them slip through our fingers—or worse, we see ourselves actively poisoning them simply by doing what feels right in the moment.

Because you've picked up this book, you probably know what broken relationships feel like. You see yourself damaging your

closest friendships or not knowing how to bring healing when someone else harms them. Sometimes these unhealthy patterns and reactions can feel so natural that you don't even think about how they came about. You might not even realize how many of them you've adopted from other people. You may only be aware that, in the moment, the strategy seems to get you what you want.

Patrice pulls away from situations she doesn't like by withdrawing from people and refusing to talk to them. Her reaction makes complete sense when you learn that for her whole life she witnessed her father controlling her mother with the silent treatment. You probably wouldn't be too surprised to discover that this was the example he had while growing up in *his* home. Each generation learned how to relate to others from the generation before, even if those ways soured the closest relationships they had.

We are all fully responsible for the ways we mistreat each other, *and* we have all learned from the bad examples we've had. Nature (your own sinful inclinations) and nurture (the things you've experienced from others) join forces to undermine your relationships. They produce what the apostle Peter refers to as "the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers" (1 Peter 1:18, NIV).

Some people have more "empty way of life" quotient than others, but every person has embraced a legacy of emptiness—patterns of relating that seem right in the moment, but that ultimately tear friendships apart. These patterns are truly insane. What else can you call it when you repeatedly engage your children, spouse, parents, or friends in the same destructive ways even though you realize you're driving them away?

For someone like Patrice, the empty ways she deals with are primarily identified by the ongoing presence of evil. People in those positions experienced an aggressive negative relational style and had to react to it. Some become comfortable adopting the model as their own by taking the junkyard dog approach. They relate to

others with the belief that, “If what wins arguments and protects me in this family is being loud, sarcastic, or insulting, then I will be the loudest, meanest, most caustic person in the room!” Others who have no interest in competing at that level develop self-protective strategies that keep everyone else at arm’s length.

Empty ways of life, however, are not always defined by the active presence of evil. Just as often they are characterized by the *absence* of positive elements that would foster healthy relationships.

Nick’s wife noted that his parents essentially ignored him after providing for his physical needs. Robert’s family was more extreme. He didn’t know what a hug felt like growing up. No one touched in his family nor wanted to. They didn’t own a couch, only a collection of individual chairs. Walking through his living room daily reinforced the relational message “you are on your own in this life.” That lack of physical connection mirrored the lack of intimacy at all other levels. Little wonder that these men struggled to know how to connect with their wives and kids.

Other families are not as dramatic in their dysfunction but still leave out many crucial relational elements. Some people never heard a parent say “I’m sorry; please forgive me.” Others don’t know what it is to hear “I love you. I’m proud of you. I’m so glad to see you!” Still others didn’t experience someone pursuing them, inviting them back to relationship when they’d strayed, or simply affirming their feeling that life isn’t very nice sometimes.

Without experiencing a healthy way of relating in your life, it’s really hard to know it’s even missing, much less that it’s an essential element to give someone else. The absence of positive relational interactions gets passed on just as surely as the presence of negative patterns.

Spend just a little bit of time with God’s people and you’ll quickly learn that empty ways of life abound even in the middle of the redeemed community. Small home fellowship groups don’t know how

to embrace the quirky single guy who comes for a few weeks, so he quietly drops off the radar. Warring factions break out in the congregation over what style of music we sing or how we decorate the building. Elders approach their congregation with a heavy hand or back way off with no hand. Leaders fail, like they have all the way back to Noah, and no one knows how to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

People are lured into church by hearing the language of intimacy, authenticity, and genuineness, but when they experience their absence, they are left feeling even more hurt than before. They had hoped finally to find a safe place where they could experience being loved, only to realize that Christians are not really all that good at it. Instead of being welcomed and embraced, often they can end up isolated and alone. So they walk away discouraged and cynical—with good reason.

Does any of this resonate with your own experience? Over the past twenty-five years of professional and volunteer ministry, I have yet to meet the person who doesn't struggle at some point in his or her relationships.

Maybe you find yourself undermining the relationships that are most important to you. Or maybe someone else is hurting you and you don't know how to invite that person to something better. Or maybe you just find your relationships stagnate and don't grow richer.

If that's you, you're not alone. *And* you don't have to settle for these empty ways of life. You can exchange those patterns for others that promote deep unity and peacefulness—patterns that offer a satisfying and rich relationship to the people around you.

In short, you can learn to love well.

Jesus Loves Us Out of Emptiness

Peter draws our attention to the empty ways of life only in order to highlight that we have been redeemed from them by the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19). God cares about the hold these destructive patterns have on you, and he made a way to free you from them. They don't have to control how you live and react in your relationships.

Now you may expect me to fill the rest of this book with lists of helpful hints and biblical principles for maximizing the positive things and minimizing the negatives in your relationships. But escaping an empty way of life does not rely on principles—it relies on a person. And not just a person who comes and does things *for* you or is an example *outside of* you, but a person who comes and relates *to* you.

I'm afraid that too many times we hold up Jesus as though he were simply a model of brilliant living—one who would inspire us to live a holy life in the same way that we extol the virtues of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa. The problem with that thinking is that models alone are unable to make you want to follow their example. They point out the way for you to go, but they don't empower you to walk down that path. They might inspire you, but inspiration alone is not enough to actually move you.

Over the years I have heard a number of great stories of people who have done amazing things or overcome incredible obstacles—a father who enters marathons, pushing his wheelchair-bound son; a married couple who adopts 19 children with special needs over the course of their lifetime; or the concert musician who plays at Carnegie Hall because of the countless hours of practice she spent with her instrument. Those examples are stirring. Inwardly I cheer for those people and wish them the best.

Though I am inspired by their stories, however, my own lifestyle has not changed in the least. It takes far more than inspiration to escape an empty way of life. I've not yet been driven by these examples to take up jogging, adopt even one child, or pick up an instrument. They truly are praiseworthy examples, but they're outside of me. Therefore, by themselves, they are insufficient to move me.

Jesus is different. His examples of loving and serving are not things that happen outside of me—things I dispassionately observe. Far from being an uninvolved spectator to his reconciling work, I'm a recipient of his gracious actions. He *is* my example, but he is also my experience. In experiencing him, I not only develop a personal sense of what he calls me to, but I also gain the power to live out that calling with others.

God understands that you don't always know how to love people, so he does not insist you figure out how to bootstrap yourself into relationships. Instead, he makes sure you already know exactly what love is before he requires you to love others. As the apostle John put it, "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us . . . if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10–11, in larger context of vv. 7–21). It's only after having been loved that you respond with love. You love him back, and you reach out to share with others a tiny portion of the love that you yourself have received.

It's only after having been loved that you respond with love. You love him back, and you reach out to share with others a tiny portion of the love that you yourself have received.

In my relationship with God, what's always been most important is the quality of his love for me, not the quality of my love for him. It's only as the reality of his love becomes my present experience that I will be more concerned about expressing my love to others than insisting they express theirs for me.

Too often I get this order backward with my children, like when I blew up at my child earlier. Those are the days when I keep careful track of all the ways it seems they don't care nearly enough about me. I become consumed with how they don't consider the pressures of my schedule when they want me to chauffeur them to their next sports game or to the store. I grumble about how they don't respect my property as they trample through the garden or slam the doorknob through the drywall. And I fume over how they're more interested in my money than my friendship. I confess, I have a hard time being greeted at the door after a long, hard day with "Hi, Daddy—can I have my allowance?"

In those moments, I get caught believing that what most needs to change in my family is them. They need to be more considerate, more respectful, and more grateful. In other words, I wrongly believe that our relationship is dependent on the quality of their love for me.

That's backward from the way I experience Jesus. The way he treats me, both historically and in the present, gives me the experience of being loved. And it is that experience that allows me to respond to him and extend myself to others, which is the real need of the people I live with. My family needs me to pursue them like Jesus pursues me. They need me to forgive them like Jesus forgives me. They need me to like them, engage with them, and share myself with them just as Jesus likes me, engages with me, and shares himself with me.

And that's where there is a disconnect for many people. They don't have a sense of the risen Christ relating to them in real time in a helpful, positive way. Whether I'm serving in my home church or traveling to others, I regularly interact with people who can explain historically what Jesus has done for them and who genuinely look forward to what he will do in eternity. But his present activities in their lives remain a cloudy mystery.

In turn, they struggle to communicate love to others in any tangible, recognizable form. This recognition forms the working thesis of this book: only through a present, rich, practical relationship with Jesus will you be able to develop rich, practical relationships with each other.

Your Human Relationships Flow from the God You Worship

The way I live out my relationships with people is one of the clearest indicators of how healthy my relationship with the Lord is. If I live knowing that God moves toward me all day long and invites me to move toward him, then I will engage people positively in their lives. But if I wait for others to give themselves to me first, then I show that I really don't believe or regularly experience this God who is reconciling people to himself. Either way, I live out the truth that you become whatever you worship.

The way I live out my relationships with people is one of the clearest indicators of how healthy my relationship with the Lord is.

Sadly, there are so many bad gods waiting to take Jesus' place. There's the false notion of God as a deity who sits in heaven, vaguely interested in your life, but who keeps himself pretty detached and aloof. Or there's the god who is only disengaged until you do something wrong. Then he springs into action, pulling out a long list of your failures and threatening you if you don't shape up. Or worse, maybe you've found the god who smiles at you a lot, but is too weak to challenge you or help you when you need it. The hard reality is that if your god is distant, critical, scary, or impotent then you will mimic that quality about him in the ways you treat those around you.

Thank God he doesn't leave you to those gods. Jesus came to redeem you from living out those empty ways of life handed down to you by your forefathers.

Throughout Scripture you see one overarching storyline: a good Father welcomes homeless orphans into his family by searching for them, rescuing them, embracing them, providing for them, and nurturing them. With that experience of life, you now have reason to hope for something different in the way you live with others. And hope is exactly what I need every day of my life.

My kids and I had a really rough week that felt like every interaction turned into a half-hour argument that I didn't handle very well. As the week wore on I became increasingly out of control, and I responded more harshly and critically each time. It was not a good week. Ironically, a few days later I was scheduled to give a radio interview for a booklet I had written entitled *How Do I Stop Losing It with My Kids?* I felt like such a hypocrite. I reread the booklet and kept thinking, *Hmm, that's a good idea. I wonder who wrote that?* Or, *Oh! Wish I had remembered to try that.*

At the end of the program, the interviewer asked one final question. He said, "Okay, this has been helpful, but what about the person who *has been* losing it—maybe for years? Who has been failing over and over again? What hope does that person have?"

I replied, "Well, honestly, that's me this morning. And my hope is that not only am I a parent in my family, but I'm also a child in a better family with a much better Father. And my Father is absolutely committed to being involved in my life, parenting me so that I can be the parent that he always meant me to be."

I need that hope. And I need even more than hope. It's easy to say we need to love others well, but that statement can feel pretty vague when I face a particular challenge with caring for a real, flesh-and-blood person in the smaller, practical moments of life. For instance, what does loving others well look like when I need to restore a

relationship that I just damaged? At times like that, I need to know *specifically* what love looks like.

Dazzling Love

I find it helpful to think of love as a large jewel with many facets. Each facet gives you a glimpse into the jewel's essence because each is part of the same jewel. But every viewpoint has a sparkle and radiance all its own.

Throughout this book we're going to investigate fifteen facets of *the love we experience from God* because it is in these ways that he invites you to mature as you relate to other people with love. While there are many more that we could explore—and we will as eternity unwinds—these fifteen form a solid toolkit that, as you grow in them, will affect the quality of relationships you currently have.

You can love other people only out of your own experience of being loved. Or, to say it in reverse, you cannot pass along what you yourself have not received. Does that sound limiting to you or maybe even completely demoralizing? Like you're fated never to rise above the inadequacies other people have passed down to you?

That's where a relationship with Jesus is intensely practical. Because you are his, you are not beyond hope—nor are your relationships. Missing out on being loved well by other humans does not doom your present relationships. In your present, ongoing relationship with Jesus, you can receive from him all the love you need to give to others.

He can give you what you never received, and then you can pass it to those around you who need it.

We'll approach our topic in three parts. In Part I, "Love That Responds to a Broken World," we'll look at those aspects of love

that help you move toward your friend as she experiences sin or suffering so that she knows she is not alone.

Part II, “Love That Reaches Out to Build Others Up,” focuses on aspects of love that show someone else you’re more interested in helping him be all God ever meant him to be, than using him to make yourself feel good.

And in Part III, “Love That Enjoys Heaven Now,” we’ll look at the kinds of love that allow people to see and trust your heart for them so that you can enjoy being together now.

Let me offer one caveat before we dive in: please be careful not to fall into a mindset that looks for quick, immediate results when you reach out to love well. Learning these fifteen aspects *will* improve the overall tone of your relationships, but they are not part of a guaranteed formula that works like this: if you do _____, then everyone else will respond to you with _____. Rather, you can expect to receive these elements from Jesus, and as you practice them you will find yourself moving in harmony with the way he runs his world rather than against it. In that sense your life will be better, you will be more satisfied, and your relationships will change for the better.

As a friend, lay leader, counselor, seminary professor, conference speaker, and pastor I have seen many people turn away from destructive patterns and enter into the freedom of healthy relationships. That’s been quite a privilege. Beyond all those instances of seeing people love well, however, I’m most encouraged to believe you really can escape your empty ways of living because of the way relationships in my own home have grown healthier over the years.

Remember that I told you how hard my child and I worked to ruin our relationship? Sadly, there are still plenty of times when we collectively rip at the fabric of our relationship. That’s the product of real people in a really fallen world. But even more significant is what we do with those destructive moments. By God’s kindness, we

continue to learn how to repair the rips we create and celebrate the greater number of times when we move closer without damaging our friendship.

That's the product of being loved by a gracious God in a grace-infused world. If Jesus can help free me and my family from being stuck in bad patterns, and teach us to create beneficial ones, then I know he can help you too.

As you are introduced to each way he loves us, I think you'll be surprised by how intimately involved God is with you. I know I have been surprised. After seeing and re-experiencing him in new ways, I suspect you'll hardly be able to wait to give that experience to someone else!

PART I

LOVE THAT RESPONDS TO A BROKEN WORLD

On this planet you face the reality of sin and suffering, especially in your relationships. That's a given. How you respond to others in a fallen world, however, makes all the difference. Your reactions either compound those struggles or bring relief. Two common approaches—retreating from hardships or lashing out during them—only produce greater problems down the road.

Jesus never took those paths. He never lost his friendship with God through his struggles. Even though his life was not easy, it was good. More than that, his response to those hardships actually cemented his relationships with his friends. They grew in their love for him and for each other, which set the stage for you to taste his goodness as well.

As Jesus moves toward you, he teaches you how to move toward others—toward the suffering, hurting people around you—rather than driving them away.

In Part I we're going to explore several ways of responding to someone's experience of brokenness in a way that says to her, "You

are not alone. I am in this with you.” By learning to share your presence with someone else, you will lessen the pain and difficulty of that struggle for her, rather than increasing the damage inflicted by sin or suffering.

Chapters in Part I:

1. Comforting Love: Running to Those Who Are Suffering
2. Sympathetic Love: Taking on Each Other’s Sorrows
3. Struggling Love: Confessing Our Temptations to Each Other
4. Forgiving Love: Covering a Multitude of Sins
5. Longsuffering Love: Patiently Bearing with Each Other

CHAPTER I

Comforting Love: Running to Those Who Are Suffering

The first aspect of God's love we will explore is how he moves toward you when you suffer. That simple act of coming near to share himself in your difficult moments eases your sufferings because you learn that you are not alone. It sounds simple, but in the face of someone's pain, that thought is hard to remember and even harder to do. If you are going to become someone who loves others well when they suffer, you will first have to see how God comes near to you in your misery.

It's Easy to Run from Suffering

Ray pastors a church in New Orleans. He never tires of reminding me that God makes his home among the suffering. I went to visit him two and a half years after Hurricane Katrina had devastated the city. At that time, the storm had become part of vaguely remembered history for much of the rest of the country. The only remnant

most of us still encountered were fuel prices that hadn't fallen back to pre-Katrina levels. But for those living in New Orleans, the storm was not part of their past; it was something they lived with every day.

While most of the loose debris had been removed, other reminders of the storm were everywhere you looked. Boarded-up commercial buildings had not been repaired and didn't look likely to ever be repaired. Tap water was still not quite safe to drink. FEMA trailers, designed for a maximum of one-year occupancy, were still being used as we drove past mile after mile of empty, condemned homes. To put this into hard numbers, Ray pointed out that if the 520 licensed contractors in the city each were to completely restore 10 houses a year, it would take another 35 years to rebuild the city.

The most ominous reminder, however, was a dull yellow-brown stripe that ran horizontally across buildings, bridges, and every other permanent structure. This line marked the high-water stage of the flood. As the water slowly evaporated under the sweltering September heat, it left a six-to-eight-inch-wide sediment stripe across everything it touched. It's an eerie reminder of the scale of what happened when you drive along the road or walk along a street and calculate how far below the surface of the water you would have been—four feet, eight feet, ten feet, or more.

Signs of pain and suffering are everywhere. They are daily reminders that all is not right, that life is hard. Without being overly dramatic, let me say that suffering formed the context for every interaction that people had in that city. And that reality overwhelms people and burns them out.

The year before I visited, 120 people became members at Ray's church . . . while 60 members left the area. It is not an easy calling. But among the people who remained, I didn't sense that pessimism was the reigning emotion. Rather, they shared a sense of God's special presence among them.

That is the kind of comforting presence you and I need as well.

Suffering is not unique to a few people who have chosen to remain in a flood-ravaged city. Rather, after humanity's fall into sin, suffering became as common to us as the air we breathe. Spend a little time talking to people and you will hear a repeated theme of suffering in everyone's story.

If you live on this planet, you cannot escape suffering. Some people cause their own suffering by the choices that they make—and so they reap the consequences of their sin. Others seem to fall into suffering through no fault of their own, as with chronic illnesses or things that happen to them unexpectedly. In either case, suffering is so prevalent that you rub shoulders with it daily in your own life and in the lives of the people around you.

Sadly, many of our responses are inadequate to this great and unending need. Some of us grow desensitized. We become so used to seeing suffering and pain that we tune it out. Worse, we grow calloused, getting to the point where people's hardships don't affect us.

Or, if we don't lose our sensitivity, we become fatigued. We get discouraged. We don't know what to do or how to handle the overload because it is always present, and so we wear out. Then we pull back, retreating inside our own worlds, reducing contact with others to protect ourselves.

In either case, the result is the same; we remove ourselves from the people who need us the most. Maybe you know what that is like. You realize that part of the reason there's now distance between you and your spouse or friend is because there seems no end to his needs. These responses are very understandable. They're very human.

Thankfully, God is very different.

Jesus, Our Sorrow Carrier

We all know that Jesus carried our sins on the cross, but have you let yourself think much about how he also carried our sorrows?¹

Isaiah the prophet describes the Messiah who is to come in chapter 53 of his book. Look at verses 2–4:

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

Life on earth was just not fun for Jesus. Do you know what it is to be despised? To be rejected? To have people treat you with contempt? Jesus knew it all. “Despised and rejected” is not a vague, theological concept. It has a face and a voice.

“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him,” Isaiah says. There was nothing impressive about Jesus. Nothing about him physically that would draw others to him. At best, people overlooked him. But people aren’t always at their best. “Despised and rejected” implies that he attracted negative attention and ridicule. Know how that feels?

Can you hear people making comments about his mother—how her pregnancy with him showed she must have been sleeping around before she got married? Did the brothers he grew up with say anything to him about not sharing the same dad? Despised and rejected.

Did people think he was too religious for his own good—that a little religion was a good thing, but that he went overboard?

His mother and brothers showed up wanting to see him one time when he was teaching (Matthew 12:46; Luke 8:19). That sounds positive, doesn't it? It takes on a darker cast, however, when you read how Mark records it in chapter 3 of his book. There we learn that they wanted to see him so they could forcibly take him away because they believed he was out of his mind (v. 21). Despised and rejected.

This was a man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief. He knew intimately what sorrow and sadness were. He lived in the land of grief. But against all our modern psychological expectations, his experiences didn't turn him sour. He didn't become bitter or sociopathic. Instead, he moved to help those who also lived in the land of sadness—he bore *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows. Not only did he have his own unhappy experiences to bear, he reached out and burdened himself with the sadness that other people carried.

When we think of the cross and what Jesus did there, we rightly focus on how he paid the penalty for our sins so that we could be friends with God. But he did more. According to Isaiah, he was also weighed down with the things we suffer in this life. Not only did he experience carrying our sins, but also the consequences that our sins and the sins of others leave us with. He bore our sins *and* our sorrows.

And we didn't cheer him on or appreciate him for his sacrifice. No, "we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted." We thought he was cursed by God even while he was experiencing our world, carrying our sins. He left all the comforts he had in heaven to enter our world to know us and rescue us and make our burdens lighter, and we thought he was a loser.

But he didn't care. Instead, we see him almost running toward suffering people to help them. Blind men, lepers, paralytics, the hungry, the fearful, and the scared all found relief as he entered

their worlds. He put things right for them. But most importantly, he shared himself—he touched them, talked to them, and wept with them. In sharing himself, by being present with them in their sorrows, he eased their suffering.

You and I can do that too. We can be present in the sorrows of our loved ones.

When Amy risked letting her friends know that her unwed daughter was pregnant, Kathy dropped everything she was doing and raced over to Amy's house—because you cannot phone in the hug she needed. Kathy learned that truth from Jesus, who had often shared himself with her in her dark moments.

This doesn't take specialized training or a professional degree. You only need to practice being aware that people who are struggling need your physical presence.

Together in the Hard Places

Surprisingly, we also see Jesus looking for this kind of love to come alongside and comfort him in his sorrows. After sharing the Passover meal with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, he went into a garden.

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And *he took with him* Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. (Mark 14:32–33, emphasis added)

He was facing the most challenging moment of his life. He was about to enter suffering that goes beyond description, and he needed to connect with his Father. And yet, that isn't all he wanted; he also wanted his human friends to enter into that difficult moment with

him. What did he expect they would do for him? There wasn't anything they could do . . . except be there with him, watching and praying.

Part of comforting love involves human presence—not just divine presence—and even Jesus wanted that. But Jesus not only wanted it, he invited it.

Does that surprise you? Many people believe that all you need is the Bible and Jesus to get through life. And so we discount the need to be in each other's lives as we go through hard times.

Kimberly had been wrestling with the fear of having someone close to her die. She'd lost two children and

was scared of losing her husband. That was a heavy weight to carry around. She was finally willing to admit it, and when she did she felt a huge sense of relief.

When I offered to help her work through why she was having so much trouble trusting the Lord, she jumped at the opportunity and expressed how happy she was for the chance. Simply making the time to be with her meant a lot. But then I didn't see or hear from her again. Several weeks later I learned that someone else had talked to her. This person had told her, "Oh, your problem is that you just need to have more faith. You would be fine if you could just connect with God a little bit more or a little bit better."

Funny how the Son of God didn't believe that. Jesus actively sought out human companionship at the time of his greatest need. Almost sounds blasphemous, doesn't it? He didn't think that all he needed was God, *nor* did he think all he needed was human community. He longed for both to give him comfort, just as he had offered his presence to others to comfort them.

There is something vitally important about being with each other as we're going through the hard places in our lives.

*Part of comforting love
involves human presence—
not just divine presence*

Move toward the Suffering

Suffering isolates. No two experiences of suffering are exactly the same, which leaves you thinking, “No one else will be able to understand this.” So you tend to shut yourself off from others. That sense of isolation only increases when others leave you alone.

Somehow, amid all the prenatal checkups and ultrasounds, the doctors missed that Maggie’s baby suffered a rare congenital defect, a reality that finally became evident during her emergency C-section. There was nothing anyone could do for the little one, so Maggie and her husband took him home and cared for him until he died three weeks later.

Can you imagine what that was like? She had carried him to full term, dreamed of what he might look like, started building hopes for him, gotten everything together to take care of him . . . and then he wasn’t there anymore. Her church family rallied around her and her family—initially. But then, slowly, they stopped asking how she was. Who knew what she might say? And so, although they didn’t intend to, they effectively ignored what she was going through. Three months later, to them it was as though nothing had happened. They continued as if things were normal.

For her, things were anything but normal. Her world had been turned upside down. She was distressed in her body, her emotions, and her immediate family. She was still grieving and would be for a long time. But without someone moving toward her, the option for her to grieve with others was not open to her. She needed people to continue moving toward her, to break through the barriers that kept her alone with her grief.

Suffering doesn’t have a lifespan you can conveniently schedule or contain. There are no easy, three-step ways of moving through it or predicting it. That’s why Jesus’ solution is personal. He urges you to move toward suffering people because that’s what you’ve experienced from him.

Sharing the Comfort God Gave You

Thankfully, the early church understood how necessary it was for them to actively comfort each other. Listen to how Paul begins his second letter to his friends in the city of Corinth:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:3–11)

Pay attention to the event that forms the context for this letter. Paul alludes to it in the second paragraph. What he and his companions were going through was so bad that it was more than they could take. They felt so strongly that the sentence of death had been

served upon them that they stopped hoping they would survive. They knew very clearly that they were about to die.

Perhaps you know what that experience is like. You've been told by the doctor that you have a life-threatening cancer. You've watched helplessly as another car plowed through an intersection and slammed into yours. You've been in an accident at home or on the job that you were powerless to prevent and that you knew could easily kill you. Paul said he knew what it was like to know deep down that his life was over.

Yet even in that experience Paul had a sense that he wasn't alone. He knew God was involved, using this experience to teach him not to rely on himself but on God, who raises the dead. Many of us would have balked at that point. We would have said that if there was any purpose involved, then it would have been to rely on God to keep us from dying. Paul knew God's involvement didn't always mean he would remain safe.

God's presence guarded his life this time, but even more than that, it comforted him through the experience. As surprising as you might find Paul's confidence—that it was in a God who raises the dead versus a God who keeps us from dying—his understanding of God's comfort is even more unexpected.

As you unpack his logic above, you realize that Paul believed the purpose of being comforted by God was so that he could give that experience away to someone else. God is the "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). In effect, he says to the Corinthians, "I didn't go through that experience for my benefit only (that is, so that I could learn to rely more on God), but so that *you* would be comforted through it."

Do you have any experiences like that? Times when you have gone through hardship but found comfort and grace through it,

comfort that in some ways was even more meaningful for the people with whom you shared it?

My youngest son tends to pass out when he sees blood. He came in from playing in the snow one day, crying hard. He had been pushing his brother on a sled when the sled hit the porch deck and stopped. He, on the other hand, did not stop. His head kept going and smashed into the sled. He thought he had knocked a tooth out, given all the blood he saw. As he was tearfully telling us this, his eyes rolled up into his head and his body fell limp.

Once we brought him around we *really* needed to comfort him, so I began telling him there are a lot of people who have the same reaction to blood that he does—including myself. A number of years ago I finally stopped donating blood because I got tired of having to be revived. (I don't think the nurses enjoyed those experiences much either.)

It comforted my son to hear those stories of how I'd learned to live with the body and mind God had given me. As I shared them with him, he realized that he was not alone in his experience. He lives among fellow sufferers who can share some of his burden.

This is how we love: we share the stories of things we've faced. We don't do so to take center stage, but to communicate to someone else, "You're not weird. You belong."

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Paul explains the reason this way:

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:24–26)

We are all part of the same body. Paul argues in Ephesians that while we are saved *as* individuals, we are saved *into* a community—a community that is modeled on our God and works together to display an image of him to a watching world. After all, God is a “community” composed of three distinct, fully divine persons, yet so intertwined and close that he calls himself one God. Our human community, bound together in the Holy Spirit, is also made up of many different persons, yet we collectively form one body—in the same way that I am composed of billions of individual cells, yet they all cohere in one person.

If *any* part of Christ’s body hurts, then the whole body hurts, and it is only right that we would gather around that hurting part in order to care for him or her. If we didn’t, we would be demonstrating a body that is unhealthy and sick. A simple but important part of love is to run to sufferers and share with them our presence and the comfort we ourselves have received.

Pause for a moment and think: who are the people you know who need the comfort of your presence in their suffering? Are there stories from your life that will comfort them?

That’s what you see Paul doing in his relationships. He tells his story of suffering and finding God in the middle of it, in order to use that experience to help the people around him. While Jesus asked for companionship in his sufferings, Paul demonstrates how to be a companion for the suffering, how to share comfort with each other when we’re hurting. God cares about our sufferings and can’t stand to leave us alone in them. It is one of the primary attributes of his love.

Because we have experienced that kind of love from God, we find we can come alongside others to help relieve their suffering.

Being Present with the Suffering

When your child cries, you drop everything and go to her, don't you? Why? You want to see what's wrong. You want to help if you can. And especially, you want to comfort with your presence. Simply being there with her is comforting. The same is true of all your other relationships. People will know you love them when you prioritize being with them in their distress.

Ethan told me once of getting a phone call in which he learned that his son had been rushed to the emergency room. When he arrived at the hospital he was surprised, to say the least, to find that that his pastor was already there with his son. Surprised, but deeply touched. Think about that: the pastor was not a doctor, and he had no medical knowledge that could help the boy. But his rushing to be with the family was so important to them that I heard the story many years later.

As Stan, our Pastor of Compassion Ministries, toured my neighborhood following severe damage by strong winds, he explained to me, "When something like this happens, you go. You don't make a phone call." He understood what Jesus and Paul knew: personal contact during suffering, even if you have nothing to say, is one of the most special gifts you can offer.

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Very likely, God is not calling you to relocate halfway across the country to a hurricane-plagued city set on the rim of the Gulf of Mexico (although if he is, I know a church that would warmly welcome you). But he is calling you to look around where you live and run to embrace those who are suffering.

Are there sufferers in your home? A child who's out of sorts today who needs you to realize that something at school went wrong? A

neighbor or friend at church who's been laid off, fallen ill, or targeted by a cruel employer struggling to make ends meet? Having seen their misery and having allowed it to touch you, you need to move toward them so that they know they're not alone.

That's what Jesus does for you.

On Your Own

1. What surprises you as you meditate on how Jesus responds to suffering—both to his own and to other people's? What strikes you as you reflect on the interplay of relationship, comfort, and suffering within God's family?
2. Remind yourself of a time when you experienced the comfort of God. How would you describe it? Were you also comforted by other Christians at that time? In what ways were the experiences similar? Different?
3. Ask a few friends to share their own experiences of being comforted by Jesus. What do they help you realize about the kind of comfort that God provides? What did you learn that would help you as you seek to be an agent of comfort in the lives of others?
4. During the past month, where have you reached out to comfort others with the comfort you have received? Who needs to receive that from you now?