

A PATH THROUGH SUFFERING

Elisabeth Elliot



Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Revell edition published 2014
ISBN 978-0-8007-2498-6

Previously published by Regal Books

Originally published by Servant Publications in 1990

Printed in the United States of America

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:

Elliot, Elisabeth.

A path through suffering / Elisabeth Elliot.

p. cm.

Originally published: Ann Arbor Mich. : Vine Books, 1990.

ISBN 0-8307-3469-4

1. Suffering—Religious Aspects—Christianity—Meditations. I. Title.

BV4909.E45 2004

242'.4—dc22

2003028065

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Cover design by Michael Andaloro
Illustrations by James N. Howard

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Pronouns referring to the divinity are capitalized except in quotations from Scripture. In my opinion this makes for clarity.

To Bunny
(Elizabeth Paeth Lasker)

*who, as physician, has given so much more than medicine;
as mother of five knows the suffering and the courage of love;
and as my friend has understood.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks are due to Ann Spangler and Mary Case of Servant Publications for their help, and to all who generously allowed me to use their stories.



Preface

AMONG THE VISITORS TO ISAK DINESEN'S FARM in Africa in the 1930s was a wandering Swede named Emmanuelson, who claimed to be a tragic actor. He spent one night and set off on foot the next morning for Tanganyika in spite of his hostess's warning that that was "not a possible thing to do for anyone." There was no water in the Masai Reserve and the lions were "bad" there at that time. She heard from him later, however, that he had made it to Tanganyika and on his way had been very kindly treated by the Masai.

"It was fit and becoming, I thought, that Emmanuelson should have sought refuge with the Masai," Dinesen wrote in *Out of Africa*, "and that they should have received him. The true aristocracy and the true proletariat of the world are both in understanding with tragedy. To them it is a fundamental principle of God and the key—the minor key—to existence. They differ in this way from the bourgeoisie of all classes, who deny tragedy, who will not tolerate it, and to whom the world of tragedy means itself unpleasantness."

Perhaps this is just the key we have lost. Suffering, even in its mildest forms—inconvenience, delay, disappointment, discomfort, or anything that is not in harmony with our whims and preferences—we will not tolerate. We even reject and deny it. Stress is the result, and stress, I believe, afflicts primarily those whom Dinesen would call the bourgeoisie.



Have we missed a fundamental principle of God? Is not suffering, loss, even death itself the minor key to existence? Do we not lose our very lives by trying so hard to save them?

Being neither a theologian nor a scholar has not prevented me from pondering the principle. The measure of pain in my own life (negligible compared with the sufferings I hear about) has been sufficient to pose the question of the meaning of suffering.

Is there not wrong too bitter for atoning?
What are these desperate and hideous years?
Hast Thou not heard Thy whole creation groaning,
Sighs of a bondsman and a woman's tears?

(F.W.H. Meyers: *St. Paul*)

The words which have illuminated for me the deepest understanding of suffering are Jesus' own, "In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest." This, He told His disciples, was the key. *There is a necessary link between suffering and glory.*

But what difference does that make in the life of an ordinary man or woman? (This is the question I am always asking myself as I read the Bible or books about the Bible, as I hear a spiritual talk or as I try to talk to others about spiritual things: what *difference* ought this to make in the way I live?)

Two little books, now out of print, wonderfully expand on the imagery Jesus used, and have greatly helped me to understand the principle. They are Lilius Trotter's *Parables of the Cross* and *Parables of the Christ-Life*.

Lilius Trotter was born in London in 1853, seventh child of a



businessman. She was tall and slender with large brown eyes, an active and orderly mind, and “a quality of selflessness which gave her a peculiar charm.” When she was twenty-three she met John Ruskin in Venice, who recognized her gift for painting and offered to give her lessons. “She seemed to learn everything the instant she was shown it,” he wrote, “and ever so much more than she was taught.” But her heart was elsewhere. She had put herself, her gifts, her life at God’s disposal, so it was a great disappointment to Ruskin and a surprise to others when she decided to give herself to missionary work. She was criticized and even ostracized, but her enthusiasm was fed, not quenched, by scorn.

For some reason, North Africa awakened strange vibrations in her soul. She heard what she believed was God’s specific call, and in 1888 landed in Algiers, where she spent the rest of her life. She was the founder of the Algiers Mission Band which later merged with the North Africa Mission. She died in 1928.

She found in the plant life of the deserts the fundamental principle of existence—that death is the gateway to life—exhibited in a thousand ways, and painted them with her brush and watercolors. Who is to say she was a fool for turning her back on home, the possibilities of marriage and perhaps an artist’s career (these, after all, were certainly God’s good gifts)? The last of her water colors in *Parables of the Cross* is that of the wood sorrel, springing from an apparently useless little pile of twigs and dead leaves. She writes, “God may use . . . the things that He has wrought in us, for the blessings of souls unknown to us: as these twigs and leaves of bygone years, whose individuality is forgotten, pass on vitality still to the newborn wood sorrel. God only knows the endless possibilities that lie folded in each one of us!



“Shall we not go all lengths with Him in His plans for us—not, as these ‘green things upon the earth’ in their unconsciousness, but with the glory of free choice? Shall we not translate the story of their little lives into our own?”


I am one of those souls unknown to Liliias Trotter, blessed by her surrender and sacrifice—no “fanciful mysticism,” but a spiritual reality that can be tested at every turn.

Readers may find that one chapter is enough (or more than enough) for one day’s reading. The excerpts from the parables which head each chapter bear rich food for meditation. May the Lord enable us to translate them into practical reality as we contemplate the fact of suffering.

Magnolia, Massachusetts
June 1990



The Sign of the Cross

an we not trace the sign of the Cross in the first hint of the new spring's dawning? In many cases, as in the chestnut, before a single leaf has faded, next year's buds may be seen at the summit of branch and twig, formed into its very stem blood-red.

Back in the plant's first stages, the crimson touch is to be found in seed-leaves and fresh shoots, and even in hidden sprouts. Look at the acorn, for instance, as it breaks its shell, and see how the baby tree bears its birthmark.

A SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY WROTE TO ME, "My grandmother has a brain tumor. The doctor says she only has six months to live. Can you help me about this?" He enclosed a picture of himself. I held it in my hand and studied the little face—so sweet, so wistful. Could I help him about this?

It was not the first time I had faced such a question. What was I, a jungle missionary, to say to my own child of two when she learned the song "Jesus Loves Me" and wanted to know



whether Jesus had loved her daddy too? I gave her the truth: yes. Next question: Then why did He let the Auca Indians kill him? A little girl can be shown that her father's death is a gateway to life for him, but how was I to explain the truth of the *delivering* power of death? I could not. But I still had to give an answer, a truthful answer: I did not know *all* God's reasons. The ones I was quite sure I did know Valerie could not have understood then. But that He *had* reasons, I was sure. That they were loving reasons I was also sure. The assurance that it was *not for nothing* comforted me and I gave my peace to my child.

I had had occasion to ask the same questions when I was small. Our mother and father sang us to sleep with songs like

Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'ershaded,
Sweetly my soul shall rest. (Fanny J. Crosby)

and:

Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me,
Bless Thy little lamb tonight,
Through the darkness be Thou near me,
Keep me safe 'til morning light. (Mary Duncan)

But then I was greatly frightened by the kidnapping of the famous Charles Lindbergh's baby. Did Jesus not love him?

A missionary who had been a guest in our home when I was about four had her head chopped off by Chinese Communists when I was eight. I have never forgotten the newspaper picture of her orphaned baby, peeping out of a rice basket carried by



the Chinese Christian who had found her. Jesus lets missionaries be killed. Jesus lets babies lose their parents.

Essie McCutcheon was my very lively childhood friend. She had me panting to keep up as she raced through other people's backyards and alleyways. She stood my hair on end with her imaginative stories—a giant with a match the size of a telephone pole who burned down the house next door, a corpse she found under the back porch. We were the same age, but she was way ahead of me—she would get her baby brother up in the morning, change him, lug him to the kitchen, fix his breakfast and everybody else's. All that energy and imagination and know-how! When we were both nine years old Essie was very sick in the hospital. Her sisters and parents, my brothers and my parents and I all prayed that the Lord would heal her. He could do that, we knew. But Essie died. Jesus lets children lose their best friends.

Repeatedly throughout our lives we encounter the roadblock of suffering. What do we do with it? Our answer will determine what we can say to another who needs comfort. How was I to reply to the little boy about his grandmother? Should I just give him a few Scripture verses and leave it at that? These, perhaps?

For you, the Lord is a safe retreat;
you have made the Most High your refuge.
No disaster shall befall you,
no calamity shall come upon your home. (Ps 91:9-10)

I know of no answer to give to anyone except the answer given to all the world in the cross. It was there that the great Grain of Wheat died—not that death should be the end of the story, but that it should be the beginning of the story, as it is in



all the cycles of nature. The grain dies. The harvest results. The sun must die in the west if it is to rise in the east. The crimson touch must be found even in the fresh shoots of the baby oak—they are destined for death.

So in the early springtime of his life my young correspondent must begin to trace the sign of the cross. Of course I could not unfold to him all that I have learned through the parables of plant life (and how much more there is that I have yet to learn!). It is a long road to understanding the love of God in and through our own suffering, but I could take that little boy to the proof of Jesus' love, the cross, which towers over all the "wrecks of time," stands stark and irrefutable against all the tragedy of the world. I could tell him that Jesus really does love his grandmother and loves him. He could be absolutely sure about that because Jesus had died for them.

I can still hear Essie singing her favorite chorus:

Everybody ought to love Jesus, Jesus, Jesus—
He died on the cross to save us from sin.
Everybody ought to love Jesus.

The song had a logical idea and a bouncy tune. But suffering takes us far below tunes and logic. Who of us has not known the confusion, the ambivalence, the restlessness of pain? The soul is a kingdom divided against itself. Job cried out in anguish from his ash heap. Israel complained against the Lord and blamed Moses. Moses brought their complaints and quite a few of his own to the Lord—why, why, why? Our Lord Jesus Himself wrestled with His will ("If it is possible . . . If it is not possible . . . *not my will but Thine be done*").

I think I must have asked Jesus to be my Savior at a very



early age. It would have been natural to do so, given the godly training I had. I have no recollection of not being a Christian. But when I was ten years old I heard a sermon on the words, "You must be born again." Had I been? Not certain, I stood when the invitation was given to declare publicly that I wanted to be. Two or three years later I learned that Jesus must be not only Savior but Lord. I wanted that too, and prayed a prayer of commitment written by Betty Scott Stam, the missionary who had been beheaded, surrendering all my plans, purposes, desires, and hopes, myself, my life, my all, to God to be His forever. I asked Him to work out His whole will in my life, at any cost.

In the decisions made at ten or twelve I did not clearly see the life-out-of-death principle. Of course I didn't. As someone has written, death is the only way out of any world in which we are. The newborn baby dies a death to the safe, warm life of the womb. The reborn Christian forsakes the old life, "dies" to it, and receives the life of Christ in its place. The surrender of one's will—what could be more certainly a death? But it is the condition of receiving God's will, God's life, God's joy.

There is no question in my mind that God pays attention to such prayers, even if they are prayed by a child. Never mind that we do not know what we are asking. He knows. He knows our frame, too, and remembers that we are dust, so He leads us tenderly and carefully along the pathway we have chosen, which is the way of the cross.

When I was fourteen or so I began to think seriously about the words to one of my favorite hymns, "Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand." What, exactly, did that mean? Was I willing to accept *only* the sunshine of Christ's face (when I could think of all kinds of "sunshine" I hoped for), to "know no



gain or loss" (I had several ambitions)? I wanted to be willing. It was going to take some learning.

In college I learned to love Lucy A. Bennett's hymn, "O teach me what it meaneth, that cross uplifted high" (Hymns, InterVarsity Press, Chicago 1969). Would God not begin to do just that if I asked Him to?

He began. The first place the cross touched me in a way that cut deeply was in my heart's desire for marriage. I fell in love with a man in college who had believed that God wanted him to remain single, perhaps for life, but at least until he had had experience in jungle missionary work. Here was my chance to learn what death was about—death to myself—and to take up the cross, that is, willingly to accept the will of God which went so strongly against the grain of my own. It was not easy. Jesus never suggested that it should be. Amy Carmichael's poem helped me to be specific:

Lord Crucified, O mark Thy holy Cross
On motive, preference, all fond desires,
On that which self in any form inspires,
Set Thou that sign of loss.

And when the touch of death is here and there
Laid on a thing most precious in our eyes,
Let us not wonder, let us recognize

The answer to this prayer. (*Toward Jerusalem*
Christian Literature Crusade
Ft. Washington, PA 1988, p. 96)

The cross means suffering. Suffering's meaning is to be learned through the cross.

