

BE STILL, MY SOUL

Embracing God's Purpose & Provision in Suffering

*25 Classic & Contemporary Readings
on the Problem of Pain*

Edited by
NANCY GUTHRIE

 **CROSSWAY**
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Be Still, My Soul: Embracing God's Purpose and Provision in Suffering

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*I affectionately and admiringly dedicate this book
to my friend,*

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Years ago, I stood at the back of a hotel ballroom listening to Joni speak and wondered to myself, “What is it that makes her so compelling? What makes people listen so closely to what she has to say?” And the answer to my question was obvious. It’s her suffering. Joni’s suffering gives her credibility to speak. We listen because she lives where only our deepest fears take us. And we listen because the way she articulates how she has made sense of her suffering helps us to make sense of ours.

Years later, when I met Joni, I told her that I hoped that I would be as good a steward of my suffering as she has been of hers. But I fear that is too lofty an aim, too high a hurdle. Joni not only shows me, and the rest of the world, how to persevere as a faithful steward of suffering, she shows us how to serve out of our suffering and how to radiate joy in the midst of our suffering. Mostly she shows us what it looks like to love Jesus even as she lives day-by-day in the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

Let every trial teach me more of thy peace,
more of thy love.

Thy Holy Spirit is given to increase thy graces,
and I cannot preserve or improve them unless he
works continually in me.

May he confirm my trust in thy promised help,
and let me walk humbly in dependence upon thee,
for Jesus' sake.

FROM THE VALLEY OF VISION

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Suffering:
The Servant of Our Joy

TIM KELLER

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

2 Corinthians 4:16–17

We live in a unique culture. Every other society before ours has been more reconciled to the reality that life is full of sorrow. If you read the journals of people who lived before us, it is obvious they understood this, and that they were never surprised by suffering. We are the first culture to be surprised by suffering. When Paul writes to the people of his day, “We do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away,” he speaks of suffering as a given.

Greek scholars will tell you Paul was not just talking about the body as wasting away, but about all of life in this visible world. He was saying that everything in this world is wearing away. Everything is steadily, irreversibly falling apart.

Our bodies are wearing away. Our hearts are like wind-up clocks with a finite number of clicks that are clicking away. Our physical

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appearance and attractiveness are wearing away, and we can't stop it. Our relationships are wearing away. Get a group of friends around you, and time and circumstance will eventually pull you apart. Our families are wearing away, dying off one at a time. Our skills are wearing away. You can't stay on top of your game forever. Everything is like a wave on the sand. You can't pin it down; it starts to recede from you.

Paul writes about "wasting away" to a group of people who have suggested that he can't be trusted, that God is obviously not with him. One reason Paul can't be trusted, they suggest, is that he has experienced an inordinate number of tragedies and difficulties. And, in fact, Paul makes a list of them in 2 Corinthians 11:24–28:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

The people in Corinth were saying, *How can God be with a man when all that stuff happens to him? Surely when God's with you he protects you. When God is with you, you prosper. I've been traveling the Mediterranean all my life and I've never been shipwrecked, and this guy has been shipwrecked three times?*

It's similar to the thinking Job's friends had about Job's suffering. Job's friends said, *If God is with you, this wouldn't happen. God can't be with you. If he was, he'd protect you.*

And we ask ourselves the same thing, don't we, when one thing

after another goes wrong, when we've reached the bottom and find out there's lower to go?

This can't be right, we think. Either there is no God or God is mad at me. He can't be with me or this wouldn't be happening.

How does Paul respond to this premise? Paul doesn't just say God is with him. He goes further. He says that the suffering and hardship he has experienced is not a denial of the gospel, but a confirmation of the gospel.

He writes, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (2 Cor. 4:8–12).

Paul says that the suffering and hardship he has experienced is not a denial of the gospel, but a confirmation of the gospel.

Paul is saying that the way of the gospel is death leading to resurrection, weakness resulting in triumphant exaltation. Paul is saying that the way the gospel works in Jesus' life is the way it is working in his life. He's saying that just as Jesus' suffering and death led to greater life, he is finding that the same thing is happening in his life. "My deaths seem to lead to greater life," he's saying.

The suffering he experiences because he is trying to minister lead to greater life in other people's lives, as they hear the gospel and experience spiritual life.

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And this doesn't just happen in the lives of people in professional ministry. I know a number of people—doctors and lawyers and the like, who, rather than stepping onto the ladder of professional and financial upward mobility, have decided to serve underserved people. They've given their lives to working with the poor in places off the beaten path. And when a person does that, they fall out of the structure of their profession. They kind of go off the radar, and find they can't advance. But they also find that their career death produces greater life.

When we suffer for doing the right thing, when we choose to live unselfishly, we find that our “death” leads to greater life for those around us.

But it is not only people around us who experience greater life when we suffer. In Romans 5:3–5 Paul says, “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Now what is he saying there? He's saying, “My suffering not only leads to greater life in those *around* me, but *in* me.”

It's like what happens to an acorn. Do you know how much power there is in an acorn? An entire huge tree can come out of one small little acorn. And out of that tree can come innumerable other trees. One acorn has the power to fill a continent with wood.

But only if it dies. Only if it “falls to the ground and dies” (John 12:24) is that enormous power released.

Every human soul in the image of God has infinitely more life potential than an acorn. Every soul has the capacity for compassion, beauty, greatness, composure, and character—but it will not be released until there is a death, the death that comes through suffering and trials.

Reynolds Price is a Duke University professor who had spinal cancer and survived, but is now a paraplegic. A young medical student who contracted terminal cancer wrote him, asking, “How can you believe in God with all this suffering?” Reynolds Price wrote a whole book back to him. It’s called *Letter to a Man in a Fire*. And in it he said a very bold thing at one point to this young medical student with cancer:

If you survive this ordeal in working condition, you’re almost certain to be a far more valuable medical doctor and person than you’d otherwise have been. Poets more ancient than Aeschylus have hymned the awful paradox that humankind can apparently only advance through suffering; but no one has cut that paradox in deeper letters than Aeschylus—“It is God’s law that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”¹

Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bear life. Suffering leads to life, but that seed has to fall to the ground.

That may sound nice, but how do we know it will really work? Paul tells us how in verse 14 of 2 Corinthians 4: “because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.” Because Jesus is raised from the dead, it is the very meaning of history that life comes out of death—that out of devastation comes redemption.

Then Paul gives us an example in his own life—he tells us about his “thorn in the flesh.” What was his thorn in the flesh? We don’t know. What we do know is that Paul asked God to remove it over and over, and God said “no.”

Does that remind you of anyone?

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was not just facing a thorn in his flesh, but the ultimate stake through his heart and soul. He repeatedly asked God to remove it, and God said “no.”

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What God said to Jesus and to Paul, and what he says to us is, “My power always comes to perfection through weakness. My power can only explode into your life through your weakness.”

Paul says that if Jesus can uncomplainingly submit to his infinite suffering and thereby have God's life explode into our lives and into the world, then you and I can submit to our finite suffering uncomplainingly and know the same thing will happen. The death in us will work life in us and in others around us. That's our hope.

Death in us will work life in us and in others
around us. That's our hope.

But Paul gives us even more to hope for. He writes, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:16–17).

This is a parallel passage to what he wrote in Romans 8:18: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” When we put the two together, we see the astonishing claim Paul is making. He's saying that our suffering will be outweighed by future glory, and that our suffering now is actually “achieving for us” that future glory.

Marilyn McCord Adams, who teaches philosophy at Yale, has done a study of female Christian mystics of the Middle Ages. She has distilled out of their teaching some remarkable teachings about suffering. Adams says that the Stoics said to accept suffering, the Epicureans said to avoid suffering, and the aesthetes and masochists said to embrace suffering. But, she points out, the gospel does not accept, avoid, or embrace suffering; it engulfs suffering.

What does that mean? It all has to do with hope.

If heaven is our hope, then heaven will be compensation for all we've lost. But is our greatest hope just heaven?

Our hope is the new heaven and the new earth. Our future hope is a restoration of the world and the life we've always wanted. And that changes everything in regard to suffering.

Years ago I had a terrible nightmare. In my nightmare, every member of my family was killed in terrible fashion. I woke up at 3 a.m., panting from the nightmare. It was as if I had lost my family and awakened to discover I had them back. I wanted to wake them all up and hug them. I loved them before the nightmare, but not like I did after the nightmare.

Here's the point. The joy of finding them wasn't a joy *in spite of* the nightmare but a joy *enhanced by* the nightmare.

Because of the nightmare, my joy was intensified. The nightmare was taken up into the joy of having them back. The nightmare actually punctuated my joy.

If heaven is a compensation for all the stuff we wanted that we never had, that is one thing. But if the new heaven and new earth is our hope—and it is—it will make everything horrible we've experienced nothing but a nightmare. And as a nightmare, it will infinitely, correspondingly increase our future joy and glory in a way it wouldn't have been increased if we'd never suffered.

That is the ultimate defeat of evil. To say that our suffering is an illusion or to say we will be compensated for our suffering is one thing. But to say that the suffering we experience now will one day be a servant of our joy does not just compensate for it, it undoes it.

“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” There has never been an understanding of suffering that was more hopeful or encouraging.

But to understand it, you have to “fix your eyes on it.” That's a

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discipline. Think about it until it pulverizes your discouragement.
Let the glory of it hit you.

Don't just accept suffering—because God doesn't want it.

Don't just avoid suffering—because God can use it.

Don't just embrace suffering—because it is evil.

The evil that hurts us now will be the eventual
servant of our joy and glory eternally.

Instead, enjoy the hope that suffering is going to be engulfed,
swallowed up. The evil that hurts us now will be the eventual servant
of our joy and glory eternally.

Only because he understood this do we have this amazing state-
ment by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

I have a childlike conviction that the sufferings will be healed and smoothed over, that the whole offensive comedy of human contradictions will disappear like a pitiful mirage, a vile concoction of man's Euclidean mind, feeble and puny as an atom, and that ultimately, at the world's finale, in the moment of eternal harmony, there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts, to allay all indignation, to redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed; it will suffice not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men.²

Adapted from "Christian Hope and Suffering," a sermon by Tim Keller given at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, May 16, 2004. Copyright © by Timothy Keller, 2008. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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God's Plan A

JONI EARECKSON TADA

“ . . . you meant evil against me, but God meant it
for good . . . ” *Genesis 50:20*

There was a time when I was content to wade ankle-deep in the things of God. But that was before I snapped my neck under the weight of a dive into shallow water, and a severed spinal cord left my body limp and useless. Permanent and total paralysis smashed me up against the study of God. And in the wee, sleepless hours of my early injury, I wrestled with questions about why and how this had happened to me. This was no casual question-and-answer session in a living room Bible study, nor was it a merely academic exercise. I fought off claustrophobia with hard-hitting questions directed at God: “Let me get this straight, God . . . when bad things happen, who’s behind them, you or the devil? Did you permit this or was this your plan for me?”

It was in the hospital that I first read the book of Job, and honestly I felt confused. The way I pictured God’s role in my accident was far different than what I read in Job’s story. In Job chapter 1, God makes it clear that he’s in charge. Satan conspires to use everything to cause Job misery so that he will turn his back on God—from the Sabeans to the Chaldeans, from freak storms to fire

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from the skies—but God is the one who ultimately grants the devil permission to make Job's life miserable.

I had reasoned that it was pure dumb luck that I happened to go to the beach that day. I thought it was the law of averages that the tide just happened to be low that day. I figured that if Satan and God were involved in my accident at all, then it must be that the devil had twisted God's arm for permission. I pictured God responding in a hesitant way, "Well, I guess it'll be okay for you to do such and such . . . but just this once, and please don't hurt her too much."

I reasoned that once God granted permission to Satan, he then nervously had to run behind him with a repair kit, patching up what Satan had ruined, mumbling to himself, "Oh great, now how am I going to work this for good?"

Worse yet, I thought that when I became disabled I had missed God's best for me, and that the Lord was then forced to go with some divine Plan B for my life.

I think this is the false picture many people have about the suffering in their lives. They assume that Satan's schemes throw a monkey wrench into God's plans, catching him off-guard, and presenting God with problems he wishes would have never happened.

But the truth is that God is infinitely more powerful than Satan. Satan is a created being, and a fallen one at that. And in the book of Job, God did not hesitantly and nervously grant permission to the devil to bring suffering into Job's life. Rather, God was the one who introduced the subject of Job to Satan. So who was ultimately in control? God was. And not only was God not frustrated or hindered by Satan's schemes, God actually intended to use the devil's deeds to serve his own ends and accomplish his own good purposes in Job's life.

Likewise, while the devil's motive in my disability was to shipwreck my faith by throwing a wheelchair in my way, I'm convinced

that God's motive was to thwart the devil and use the wheelchair to change me and make me more like Christ through it all.

God is heaven-bent on inviting me to share in his joy, peace, and power. But there's a catch. God only shares his joy on his terms, and those terms call for us, in some measure, to suffer as his beloved Son did while on earth. "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 Pet. 2:21). Those steps lead us into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings where we become "like him in his death"; that is, we daily take up our cross and die *to* the sins he died *for* on his cross (Phil. 3:10; Luke 9:23).

God only shares his joy on his terms,
and those terms call for us to suffer as his
beloved Son did.

When suffering sandblasts us to the core, the true stuff of which we are made is revealed. Suffering lobbs a hand-grenade into our self-centeredness, blasting our soul bare, so we can be better bonded to the Savior. Our afflictions help to make us holy. And we are never more like Christ, never more filled with his joy, peace, and power, than when sin is uprooted from our lives.

Does this mean God delights in my spinal cord injury? Was he rubbing his hands in glee when I took that dive off the raft into shallow water? Of course not. He may work "all things" together for my good, but that does not mean a spinal cord injury is, in itself, good (Rom. 8:28). God permits all sorts of things he doesn't approve of. In fact, in a world of evil and wickedness, he allows others to do what he would never do—he didn't steal Job's camels or entice the

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Sabeans or Chaldeans to wreak havoc. Yet he was able to erect a “fence” around Satan’s fury to bring ultimate good out of the devil’s wickedness. As my friend and mentor, Steve Estes, once told me, “Satan may power the ship of evil, but God steers it to serve his own ends and purposes.”

So I could ask, “Was my diving accident God’s fault?” Although he is sovereign, no, it was not his fault. Or I could ask, “Was it an assault from the devil?” and say yes, it possibly was. Or I can press further, asking, “Was it part of living in a fallen, wicked world, and not the *direct* assault of either the devil or God?” This may be the most likely scenario, but whichever the schematic, I have the comfort and confidence that the entire matter was under God’s overarching decrees, and that nothing happens in my life outside his loving plans for me.

Besides, how God allowed for my accident to happen is not the point. The point is, my suffering has taught me to “be done with sin,” putting behind me the peevish, small-minded, self-focused “Joni” to mature into the “Joni” he has destined me to be, honed and polished by years of quadriplegia (1 Pet. 4:1).

I’m not saying it’s easy. Actually, it’s getting harder. These thin, tired bones are beginning to bend under the weight of decades of paralysis. But I have to remember that the core of God’s plan is to rescue me from sin, even up to my dying breath. My pain and discomfort are not his ultimate focus. He cares about these things, but they are merely symptoms of the real problem. God cares most, not about making my life happy, healthy, and free of trouble, but about teaching me to hate my transgressions and to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. God lets me continue to feel sin’s sting through suffering while I’m heading for heaven, constantly reminding me of what I am being delivered from, exposing sin for the poison it is.

In short, one form of evil—suffering—is turned on its head to defeat another form of evil—my sin—all to the praise of God's wisdom and glory! Is the cost too great? Is the price of pain too high? Not when you consider that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

One day God will close the curtain on evil and, with it, all suffering and sorrow. Until then, I'll keep remembering something else Steve Estes once told me as he rested his hand on my wheelchair: “God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.” I can smile knowing God is accomplishing what he loves in my life—Christ in me, the hope of glory. And this is no Plan B for my life, but his good and loving Plan A.

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