

Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense

Suffering

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“We don’t have to go looking for it. It will come and find us. Sooner or later, suffering at a catastrophic level will wreck our lives. Paul Tripp understands that personally. He also understands the gospel personally. His new book does not trivialize our sufferings with glib formulas. This wise book leads us deeper into the gospel of the cross and closer to the Man of Sorrows himself.”

Ray Ortlund, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book is a balm to the soul that you will pick up and not be able to put down; it will also become a beloved friend to return to for years to come and trusted wisdom to pass out to other weary wanderers.”

Ann Voskamp, *New York Times* best-selling author, *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

“Writing after the shock of unexpectedly losing his health and dealing with ongoing suffering, Paul Tripp offers very practical advice. In particular, his reflections on common ‘traps’ often faced by people who suffer will prove helpful to many who find themselves being tossed about by the storms of life.”

Kelly M. Kopic, author, *Embodied Hope*; Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“Dealing daily with quadriplegia and chronic pain (and having battled stage III cancer), I know something about suffering—and to be honest, there’s hardly a book on the subject I haven’t read. But when Paul David Tripp offers his insights on our afflictions, *that* gets my attention. And this book does not disappoint. Yes, Paul offers an empathetic ear and solid comfort, but he fills these pages with practical, no-nonsense counsel on how to move through and beyond suffering into a fresh and lively hope. I highly recommend this remarkable new work.”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“I have read countless books on suffering, but few have inspired me to reevaluate my own adversity the way *Suffering* has. Paul Tripp’s willingness to unpack his own pain, candidly sharing the insights he has gleaned, is an unspeakable gift. His personal story is both riveting and reassuring as it points us to the unshakable hope we have in Christ, even in unimaginable circumstances. This book is a masterpiece. I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, author, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering*

“Honest. Compelling. Grace filled. This book is a gift. Paul Tripp speaks to us not as a theoretician but as a fellow sufferer. His counsel is illuminated by personal experiences, informed by biblical truth, and infused with gospel hope. With compassion and empathy, he fortifies us against the common temptations we face when suffering and helps us see that our suffering, however great, was never meant to define us. Most importantly, he points us to the Savior who has suffered in our place so that we might be ever confident of his love, his wisdom, and his good purposes for our lives.”

Bob Kaufflin, Director, Sovereign Grace Music

“Once more, Paul Tripp has taken God’s truth and applied it to our souls in a way that is both challenging and comforting. He understands the deep wells of suffering from his own experience and that of others he counsels. He clearly identifies the tempting traps that so frequently entice the heart of the sufferer, then beckons him on to find rest in God. This book will be my ‘go-to’ to give those looking to understand God’s good work of suffering in our lives. I am so sorry for Tripp’s suffering, but I am so grateful for this book!”

Connie Dever, author, *He Will Hold Me Fast*; Curriculum and Music Writer, The Praise Factory

“Paul Tripp writes this book with an honesty and humility that invites us into God’s intimate work on his heart through the dark nights. What he found—and what you’ll find if you read this book—is that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings us hope even in the most confusing and painful moments of life. Whether or not you’re suffering today, read this book and prepare yourself for the days ahead.”

Dave Furman, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *Kiss the Wave* and *Being There*

“Paul Tripp always writes with honesty, authenticity, and gospel sanity. But in this new book, Paul gifts us with a vulnerability that is rare, freeing, and inviting. As he chronicles his own journey through a life-threatening illness, Tripp helps us understand the difference between hope and hype—between spiritual spin and trusting our Father when our control, dignity, and certainty are under assault. This is one of the most timely, courageous, and helpful books on suffering I have ever read.”

Scotty Ward Smith, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee; Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

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PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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To all those who have walked suffering's
rocky and twisting pathway,
this book is for you.

Contents

Introduction	11
1 The Day My Life Changed	15
2 Suffering Is Never Neutral	27
3 The Awareness Trap	43
4 The Fear Trap	57
5 The Envy Trap	71
6 The Doubt Trap	87
7 The Denial Trap	103
8 The Discouragement Trap	117
9 The Comfort of God's Grace	131
10 The Comfort of God's Presence	145
11 The Comfort of God's Sovereignty	159
12 The Comfort of God's Purpose	173
13 The Comfort of God's People	189
14 The Comfort of a Heart at Rest	203
General Index	211
Scripture Index	215

Introduction

It was a surprise visit by an unwelcome visitor, like it is for so many sufferers. I didn't know that day that Mr. Hardship would knock on my door, barge his way in, and take residence in the most intimate rooms of my life. And I didn't have any idea how his presence would fundamentally change so many things for the long run. I watched him go room to room through my life rearranging everything, wondering what things would be like if and when he finally left. If I could have, I would have evicted this unwanted stranger, but I failed at all my attempts to boot him out the door or deny that he had taken residence in my life. I spent way too much time trying to figure out why he had knocked on my door and why he had chosen this particular moment, but I never got clear answers to my questions.

Once I realized that I couldn't kick Mr. Hardship out of my life, I gave myself to trying to understand how to live with him or around him. His presence made me feel like an actor in a drama where everyone had a script but me. I felt unprepared and unable, not just the day he first entered, but day after day. Sure, I had known that Mr. Hardship was out there, and I had heard the stories of how he had entered other people's doors, but somehow I didn't think it would happen to me. Embarrassment washed over me as I thought of the silly platitudes and empty answers I had casually given people when they'd been caught in

the confusing drama I was now in. And I thought about how foolish I'd been to think that this unwanted stranger who, somehow, someway, enters everyone's door, would for some reason omit mine.

Because I did not have the power or control to make Mr. Hardship leave, I ran to the place where I have always found wisdom, hope, and rest of heart. I ran to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in so doing, into the arms of my Savior. As I dove into the narrative of the gospel, which is the core message of God's Word, I realized something profoundly important and wonderfully comforting: I wasn't unprepared after all. The message of God's sovereign control over me and my world, the gospel's honesty about life in this fallen world, the comfort of the right-here, right-now presence and grace of the Savior, and the insight into the spiritual war that rages in my heart had prepared me well for the entrance and presence of this unwelcome stranger.

I am no longer angry or discouraged that Mr. Hardship entered my door unexpectedly that day. Although I still struggle with the pain and weakness that he has left me with, I know that I am better off because of his presence. No, I don't like the travail of pain or loss anymore than you do, but in my suffering, a miraculous thing happened: Mr. Hardship became a tool of my Savior to produce very good things in me, things that I am sure could not have been produced any other way.

Sure, there are times I get tired and wish he'd up and leave, but I don't get despondent. I know I haven't been ignored or forsaken, because long before Mr. Hardship entered my door, my Savior had taken permanent residence in my life. This means through all of this drama, I have not been left alone to deal with Mr. Hardship on my own. My Savior has been with me, for me, and in me, and he works to take very bad things and produce through them very, very good things. He has done that for me, and he will continue to do that.

So I write this book for those who also have been suddenly invaded by the same unwanted stranger. I write so that you too would feel loved, prepared, and thankful, no, not for the pain, but for the One who is there with you in your pain. He is the One who not only comforts you but produces beautiful things in you and through you out of what you didn't invite into your life and don't really want in your life and out of what doesn't seem good at all.

The Day My Life Changed

October 19, 2014, is a day I will never forget, because it's the day my life changed. I didn't want my life to change, hadn't planned for my life to change, but my life changed. It was unexpected and unwanted, out of the blue and out of my control. I didn't see it coming. Sometimes big changes come with warnings. Sometimes you can see the dark clouds on the horizon. Sometimes it's a weird feeling or an anxious thought that alerts you to something around the corner. But I was totally surprised and completely unprepared for what was about to be put on my plate.

I was away on a ministry trip and began to have some minor symptoms, but they were sufficiently minimal that I had no hint of what was about to come. But because I am no longer a recent graduate from college and am at the age when it's important to pay attention to messages your body gives you, I immediately called my physician when I got home. He suggested that because I live in Center City, Philadelphia, just a couple blocks from a huge hospital, that I go there and have them check me out. He assured me that it didn't sound like something to be fearful about and that they'd probably examine me and send me home.

The next day was Sunday, so the plan was that Luella, my wife, and I would go to church, get something to eat afterward, and then walk over to the hospital. We were so relaxed about the whole thing that we stopped at a neighborhood Starbucks on the way. We checked into the emergency room at Jefferson Hospital, knowing we would be in for a long wait, and settled in to watch the Philadelphia Eagles. I sat there more impatient to be seen by a doctor than anxious about what I would be told. Finally I was called back and asked to describe my symptoms, while my vitals were being taken.

It wasn't long before there were four physicians from different departments in the little emergency room. I asked what was going on but never got a direct answer. To my left I heard two of the doctors discussing dialysis. It made no sense to me; I thought, *What in the world are they talking about?* It didn't seem possible that I was that sick. I didn't feel sick. I had done my regular daily ten-mile bike sprint that week. I had just spoken for six hours over the weekend with all the energy I always have. I thought they must have the wrong chart, that they must be looking at the wrong symptoms. But those doctors weren't in the wrong examining room. In a flash, painful procedures were being done on me, and before long, I was admitted for what would become a ten-day stay. It was confusing and disconcerting, to say the least. I didn't understand what was going on; all I knew for sure was that a leisurely afternoon had suddenly become very serious and very painful. But I had no preparation for what was about to happen next.

Almost immediately after arriving in my hospital room, I went into a full-body spasm. I will never be able to adequately describe it to you. This was pain like I never knew existed, and during the spasms the pain was focused on my groin area, where it felt as if someone had stuck me with a knife. The spasms came with ferocity every two or three minutes, and when they came,

I screamed. When you're scared, you sometimes scream for help because you hope someone will hear and come to the rescue. These were not that type of scream. The pain was so intolerable that involuntary screams just came out of me. And in between my screams I cried in despair, "God, help me! God, help me!" It was terrifying to go through. I was not afraid of the next day; I was terrified of the next five minutes and the torture the spasms would bring.

I screamed for thirty-six hours, and as I screamed, I couldn't understand why someone in the hospital didn't help me. I couldn't grasp why they didn't do something to relieve my pain. One nurse told me not to let my body tense up when the spasms came because that made them worse. She might as well have told me to jump over the moon. When the spasms came, I lost all ability to control my physical responses. After a particularly horrible and longer-than-usual spasm, in tears I looked at Luella and told her I wanted to die. I just wanted the torture to stop, and it seemed impossible that someone couldn't do something to help me with my pain.

Compounding my pain was confusion. I had no idea what was happening to me. I had no idea how I had gotten from a relaxing chai with Luella at Starbucks that afternoon to this horrid scene. I had no concept of what was happening in my body that would somehow make sense of all this. And I had no idea what the doctors were doing behind the scenes to deal with whatever was going on inside me. The suddenness and irrationality of it all just made what I was experiencing all the more difficult. I wanted it all to stop, and I didn't care how.

In one of those moments when I was crying out, wondering why no one was doing anything to relieve my pain, my son Ethan said, "Dad, they're not worried about your pain right now; they're worried about saving your life. When you're stable, they'll give you something for your pain." Those words were

enormously helpful. And there did come a moment when they gave me something to lessen the pain of those spasms.

What I'd thought would be a checkup became a ten-day hospital stay. And for the first few days I didn't know what I was dealing with. I knew something was terribly wrong, and so Steve, who manages my ministry life, began canceling upcoming ministry events. I lay in bed, exhausted and discouraged and in constant discomfort. They had inserted a catheter, and I bled into the catheter for the entire ten days, sometimes painfully passing rather large blood clots.

How had I gotten so sick so quickly? What was wrong, and how would it be fixed? Was I in the right medical hands? How long would I be in the hospital? How would all of this alter my life? What impact would it have in my ministry? What would it mean for Luella and my children? What in the world was God doing? These were some of the questions that rattled around in my brain as I lay in that bed bleeding into a bag.

About the third day in, the kidney doctor who had been assigned to my case came in and informed me that my kidneys had been significantly damaged. I would learn later that when I arrived at the hospital, I was in acute kidney failure. If I had waited seven to ten more days, my kidneys would have died, and I would not be writing this book. It was shocking and unreal to hear. I had walked into the hospital with the identity of a healthy man. I had done my fitness routine that week. I had not felt sick. But I was a very sick man with a very serious diagnosis that would forever change my life.

In ways that I had never experienced before, I felt vulnerable and small. I was haunted by the thought that there might be other things going on in my body that I didn't know about. I hadn't thought about death until now, but that thought was now with me all the time. I had never thought about living long term with illness or the effects of major damage to a very impor-

tant system in my body. I wondered if I would be able to continue to do what God had called for me to do, and, if I couldn't, what would we do, how would we live? I cried out for God's help, with those exact words, because I was too shocked and confused to know what to pray for. I grabbed hold of his promises. I tried to preach to myself of his presence, but it was hard. In the middle of the night it was hard when the nurse came in to change my bag, as I lay awake in the darkness to control my thoughts. Luella slept in the chair next to me, and I would grab her hand and cry. I didn't even know what I was crying about; the tears just came.

When they finally released me from the hospital, I was still a very sick man. I left the hospital with a catheter and a bag strapped to my leg. The apparatus made it uncomfortable to sit, sleep, or walk. I wasn't used to the apparatus, so I made disgusting messes. It all was mortifying and a bit dehumanizing. But I believe that God is good, and I did everything I could to run toward his goodness and not away from it. As I got stronger I traveled to conferences to speak with the bag strapped to my leg and the fear each time that I would not have the strength to get through the entire weekend.

During the first post-hospital-release appointment with my physician, I was told of the severity of my kidney damage and directed to the nephrologist who would handle my follow-up care. When I saw my kidney doctor I was told that I had lost 65 percent of my kidney function and that the damage could not be reversed. I left that appointment weighed down by the long list of life-changing effects from the kidney damage. Little did I know that I was not at the end of my physical travail, but at the beginning.

Soon after, I was informed that I needed a rather major surgery. Coming just a few months after I'd been released from the hospital, it was a blow. I had just begun to climb my way back physically and into my ministry life, and I was about to be

physically knocked down again and have my ministry life interrupted again. You cannot go through things like this without wondering what God is doing and without at least being tempted to doubt his wisdom, goodness, and love. I did face those temptations, but I would not let my heart go there. I held onto God's promises even in the middle of the disappointment and confusion. But it was very discouraging. I did grapple with the seeming irrationality of it all; how did it make sense that at the moment of my greatest ministry influence, I would be rendered weaker than I had ever been?

After surgery, I once again thought that I was on the road to the recovery of my normal life, but recovery was not the plan. About three months after my surgery and second hospital stay, I was informed that I would need another surgery. Scar tissue had developed that put my kidneys at risk, and since I didn't have much kidney left, surgery was essential. The day of my second surgery I was awakened at about four-thirty in the morning to head to the hospital to get prepped. I was anxious about the surgery but discouraged with the prospects of its effects. I knew I would be knocked back physically and have to start the recovery process all over again. I knew that my life and ministry would be put on hold again. And I knew that I had no power whatsoever to keep all that from happening.

Physical suffering exposes the delusion of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency. If you and I had the kind of control that we fall into thinking we have, none of us would ever go through anything difficult. None of us would choose to be sick. None of us would choose to experience physical pain. None of us likes the prospect of being physically weak and disabled. None of us likes our lives being put on hold. Physical suffering does force you to face the reality that your life is in the hands of another. It reminds you that you are small and dependent, that whatever little bits

of power and control you have can be taken away in an instant. Independence is a delusion that is quickly exposed by suffering.

I found what I was going through to be not only discouraging in many ways but also deeply humbling. My weakness enabled me to see and admit to things that I had never faced in myself before. My sickness redefined who I thought I was and what I thought of my walk with God. Let me explain. During these months I was confronted with the reality that much of what I thought was faith in Christ was actually confidence in my physical condition and pride in my ability to produce. I had always had lots of energy and was quite physically fit for my age. I never remember being very tired, never required much sleep, and was always able to be productive. I used to proudly say that sleep was a necessary interruption to an otherwise productive day. Suffering has the power to expose what you have been trusting all along. If you lose your hope when your physical body fails, maybe your hope wasn't really in your Savior after all. It was humbling to confess that what I thought was faith was actually self-reliance.

But God wasn't done with me yet. Contrary to what I expected and would have planned, I wasn't done with surgery or the hospital stays and the suspended life that would follow. Almost four months later, with a body that had not yet fully recovered, I found myself being wheeled into surgery again. More scar tissue had developed, creating more blockages and putting my kidneys at risk once again. Each surgery was followed by catheterization and that bag attached to my leg. Each surgery resulted in lots of pain, profound weakness, and sleepless nights. Each surgery was accompanied by the spiritual battle of heart and mind. Each surgery was followed by all the temptations that greet everyone who suffers in this broken world. Each time, I was reminded that suffering is spiritual warfare.

The best way to characterize my discouragement at that time is by something that I tearfully said to Luella more than once: “All I want is Paul back again!” The old Paul is what I longed for, the one with endless energy and a body that functions without medical assistance. I wanted the old Paul who could deal with a ridiculously busy schedule and never feel stressed or tired. I hated being sick, weak, and tired, and I hated the fact that I couldn’t free myself from the cycle of surgeries I was trapped in. I didn’t hate God, I didn’t jettison my theology, and I didn’t bring God into the court of my judgment to question his wisdom and love, but I did struggle to accept what had been put on my plate. I didn’t look good, I didn’t feel good, and I had little energy to do the things that God had called me to do. I intended to spend some hours writing, but many of those days I got up with so little energy of body and mind that all I could do was sit in a chair.

I got through the day by taking naps, something I had never done before. I used to make fun of people who couldn’t cope without their daily nap. I now looked forward to my nap. It was all very disorienting and disheartening. I didn’t recognize the person I had become and couldn’t relate to the level of inability I felt. As all this was washing over me, I got more bad news: I would need yet another surgery. I will shorten the story here. I kept needing surgery after surgery until I had sustained six surgeries in two years! Never did my body have enough time to recover. Weakness built upon weakness, symptoms piled upon symptoms, and the war within raged. No one’s body can tolerate surgery after surgery in the same anatomical area. I did wonder if in the attempt to save my kidneys, other parts of my body were being irreparably damaged.

My sixth surgery was the biggest and most difficult yet. My surgeon had avoided doing this surgery because it was so invasive and painful and would be followed by a lengthy and difficult recovery period. But it was clear that it needed to be done. It was

very difficult and painful and left me essentially homebound for two months.

I still don't know what I am facing physically. It has been six months since that last big surgery, and my symptoms are as manageable as possible at this point, but I have been left a physically damaged man. I will never again be able to do ministry the way I had done it for years. I will never again have the energy I once had. I will always be limited by the results of major damage to an essential organ. And since my ministry was largely funded by weekend conferences, my physical suffering has brought with it financial stresses for me and my ministry team. We've had to make hard decisions, decisions none of us wanted to make. We've had to ask hard questions that we never thought we would need to ask. We've had to confess our dependency on God in deeper ways than we have ever confessed it before. And we've had to thank God for a new normal that we would have never chosen for ourselves.

Why Start This Book with My Story?

Suffering is never abstract, theoretical, or impersonal. Suffering is real, tangible, personal, and specific. The Bible never presents suffering as an idea or a concept but puts it before us in the blood-and-guts drama of real human experiences. When it comes to suffering, Scripture is never avoidant or cosmetic in its approach. The Bible never minimizes the harsh experiences of life in this terribly broken world, and in so doing, the Bible forces us out of our denial and toward humble honesty. In fact, the Bible is so honest about suffering that it recounts stories that are so weird and dark that if they were a Netflix video you probably wouldn't watch it.

Scripture never looks down on the sufferer, it never mocks his pain, it never turns a deaf ear to his cries, and it never condemns him for his struggle. It presents to the sufferer a God who

understands, who cares, who invites us to come to him for help, and who promises one day to end all suffering of any kind once and forever. Because of this, the Bible, while being dramatically honest about suffering, is at the same time gloriously hopeful. And it's not just that the Bible tells the story of suffering honestly and authentically; it also gives us concrete and real hope.

I had no interest in writing a book that essentially laid out a theoretical theology of suffering, because I think that would have been an unbiblical handling of what the Bible has to say about suffering. The entire discussion of suffering is done at street level where the mud and blood of suffering splashes up and in some way stains us all. This is why I have told you my story, a story that I am still living out every day. Last week I went without one night of real sleep. The weakness washed over me, and I was reminded that my travail is not over because some systems in my body are irreparably broken. I want this book to live where sufferers live, to speak to sufferers' cries, and to practically address the things that every sufferer grapples with.

So this book will place the gorgeous, honest, and hopeful theology of suffering, which is a core theme of the redemptive story, into the context of an actual sufferer's story. Beautiful truths will be presented and understood in connection with real human pain and struggle. Remember that the theology of suffering in Scripture is never, ever an end in itself but is designed as a means to the end of real comfort, real direction, real protection, real conviction, and real hope. This concrete way of dealing with what Scripture teaches forces us away from platitudes and denial and toward concrete understanding and candor.

If you are suffering now, I invite you to take this journey with me; my hope is that I will give words to your struggle and rest in the midst of your pain. If you are not suffering now, look around, because someone near you is, and this book will put you inside their experience and help you know what it's like to love them, to

walk with them, and to help them bear that burden. And if you are not suffering now, you will someday. Somehow, someday, suffering enters everyone's door. Sometimes you see it coming, and other times it blindsides you, but it will come because we are imperfect people who inflict suffering on one another, and we all are unable to completely escape the brokenness of the world that is our present address.

Because of the amazing practical wisdom of God's Word, the glory of God's presence and power, and the reality of mercies that are new every morning, we do not have to run from this topic. We can stare it in the face with open and expectant hearts. Remember that the hope of redemption is not just reserved for eternity but is a real, living, present hope. This hope is rooted in the fact that your Lord is in you, he is with you, and he is for you right here, right now. And this truth radically changes how we understand, experience, and respond to the suffering that has or surely will come our way. So with gospel courage read on, knowing that there is no valley of suffering so deep that God's grace in Jesus isn't deeper.

Review and Reflect

1. How do you see the Lord's providence in Paul Tripp's health crisis?
2. Paul speaks of clinging to God's promises and crying out for his help. How does having an understanding and belief in God help in times of suffering?
3. Paul Tripp states that "Scripture never looks down on the sufferer" (p. 23). How does that encourage you?

26 *Suffering*

4. Have you ever considered that at its core, suffering is spiritual warfare?

5. When you pray that your hope would be “rooted in the fact that your Lord is in you, he is with you, and he is for you right here, right now” (p. 25), how can you look differently at suffering?

Heart Reset

- Psalm 13:1–6; 27:1–14

- Isaiah 43:1

Suffering Is Never Neutral

I wish I could say that my experience of suffering was neutral, but it wasn't, and it isn't for anybody else either. Here's what every sufferer needs to understand: *you never just suffer the thing that you're suffering, but you always also suffer the way that you're suffering that thing.* You and I never come to our suffering empty-handed. We always drag a bag full of experiences, expectations, assumptions, perspectives, desires, intentions, and decisions into our suffering. So our lives are shaped not just by what we suffer but by what we bring to our suffering. What you think about yourself, life, God, and others will profoundly affect the way you think about, interact with, and respond to the difficulty that comes your way.

This is humbling to admit, but there were two things I didn't know I was carrying into my physical travail that shaped how I walked my way through the experience. First was *pride*. I was unaware that there was a lot of pride in me—pride in physical health and in accomplishment. About three years before I got sick, I lost 40 pounds, changed my whole relationship to food, and began to exercise more aggressively. It worked. I kept the weight off and felt younger and more energetic than I had for

years. I was proud of my physical fitness and confident in the healthiness of my body. I was proud too that because I was physically strong, I was able to be productive. I traveled every weekend to conferences around the world and wrote book after book in between. I look back and now see that I lived with assessments of invincibility. I was not a young man, but I felt like I was at the top of my game. Health and success are intoxicating but also vulnerable.

When I realized I was very ill and that weakness and fatigue would be with me for the rest of my life, the blow was not just physical, but emotional and spiritual as well. Honestly, I didn't suffer just physical pain, but also the even more profound pain of the death of my delusion of invincibility and the pride of productivity. These are subtle but deeply ingrained identity issues. I would've told you that my identity was firmly rooted in Christ, and there are significant ways in which it was, but underneath were artifacts of self-reliance.

Now, here's what happens in times of suffering. When the thing you have been trusting (whether you knew it or not) is laid to waste, you don't suffer just the loss of that thing; you also suffer the loss of the identity and security that it provided. This may not make sense to you if right now you are going through something that you wouldn't have planned for yourself, but the weakness that is now a part of my regular life has been a huge instrument of God's grace (see 2 Cor. 12:9.) It has done two things for me. First, it has exposed an *idol of self* I did not know was there. Pride in my physical health and my ability to produce made me take credit for what I couldn't have produced on my own. God created and controls my physical body, and God has given me the gifts that I employ every day. Physical health and productivity should produce deeper gratitude and worship, not self-reliance and pride in productivity. I am thankful for what my

weakness has exposed and for being freed by grace from having to prove any longer that I am what I think I am.

But there's a second thing that has been wonderful to understand. Perhaps we curse physical weakness because we are uncomfortable with placing our trust in God. Let me explain. Weakness simply demonstrates what has been true all along: we are completely dependent on God for life and breath and everything else. Weakness was not the end for me, but a new beginning, because weakness provides the context in which true strength is found. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that he'll boast in his weakness. It sounds weird and crazy when you first read it, but it's not. He has come to know that God's "power is made perfect" in his weakness. You see, weakness is not what you and I should be afraid of. We should fear our delusion of strength. Strong people tend not to reach out for help, because they think they don't need it. When you have been proven weak, you tap into the endless resources of divine power that are yours in Christ. In my weakness I have known strength that I never knew before.

The second thing that shaped the way I suffered physically was *unrealistic expectations*. Suffering shouldn't surprise us, but it almost always does, and it surely surprised me. Now, this is humbling to admit because I wrote a book about living with the reality of the fall in view.¹ I did go into my sickness with my theology in the right place. I did believe that I lived in a groaning world crying out for redemption, but it was battling with something else inside me. There was this expectation that I would always be as I had been, that is, that I would always be strong and healthy. There was little room in my life, family, and ministry plans for weakness within or trouble without. In fact, there was no room for any disruption at all. So much of the way

1. Paul David Tripp, *Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2009).

I thought about myself and planned was based on the unrealistic expectation that I would continue to escape the regular disruption of one's life and plans that happens in a world that doesn't operate as God designed it to operate.

I wasn't singled out; God hadn't forgotten me or turned his back. I wasn't being punished for my choices, and I wasn't receiving the expected consequences for poor decisions. My story is about the regular things that happen to us all because we live in a world that has been dramatically damaged by sin. In this world sickness and disease live, and our bodies break down or don't function properly. In this world pain, sometimes chronic and sometimes acute, assaults us and makes life nearly unlivable. We live in a broken world where people die, food decays, wars rage, governments are corrupt, people take what isn't theirs and inflict violence on one another, spouses act hatefully toward each another, children are abused instead of protected, people slowly die of starvation or die suddenly from disease, sexual and gender confusion lives, drugs addict and destroy, gossip destroys reputations, lust and greed control hearts, bitterness grows like a cancer, and the list could go on and on.

The Bible doesn't pull any punches. At every turn, it informs and warns us about the nature of the world, which is the address where we all live. Whether it's a dramatic narrative of life, or a doctrine that informs, or a wisdom principle about how to live well, Scripture works to prepare us, not so we would live in fear, but so we will be ready for the things we will all face. God gives us everything we need so that we will live with realistic expectations and so that moments of difficulty will not be full of shock, fear, and panic, but experienced with faith, calm, and confident choices.

Although I had right theology in place, somehow, at street level, my expectations were unrealistic, and unrealistic expectations always make suffering harder. My point is that I am a

living example of the truth that you and I never suffer just the thing that we're suffering, but we also suffer the way that we're suffering it. Each of us brings to our suffering things that shape the way that we suffer. We all suffer, but we don't suffer the same way, because our suffering is shaped by what we carry into the difficulties that come our way.

Here's what is so important to understand, and what may be the principal contribution of this book: your suffering is more powerfully shaped by what's in your heart than by what's in your body or in the world around you. Now, don't misunderstand what I am saying. My suffering was real, the dysfunction in my body was real, the damage to my kidneys is real, the pain I went through was horribly real, and the weakness that is now my normal life is real. But the way that I experienced all those harsh realities was shaped by the thoughts, desires, dreams, expectations, cravings, fears, and assumptions of my heart. The same is true for you. Your responses to the situations in your life, whether physical, relational, or circumstantial, are always more determined by what is inside you (your heart) than by the things you are facing. This is why people have dramatically different responses to the same situations of difficulty. This is why the writer of Proverbs says:

Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life. (Prov. 4:23)

Like a stream, your attitudes, choices, reactions, decisions, and responses to whatever you are facing flow out of your heart. The heart is the center of your personhood. The heart is your causal core, as dry soil soaks in the liquid of a stream. Suffering draws out the true thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and desires of your heart. So it's helpful to consider the kinds of things we bring to our suffering that cause us to trouble our own trouble.

What Do You Bring to Your Suffering?

Following is a suggestive, not exhaustive, list of the kinds of things that we bring to moments of suffering that deepen the pain of the painful thing we are facing.

1. *Poor Theology*

Remember that every human being thinks and lives theologically. Whether you're aware of it or not, you carry around a well-developed personal worldview that shapes the way you interpret and deal with everything that comes your way. That worldview gives some kind of answer to questions like: Who is God? What is he doing? Why is he doing what he's doing? Who am I? What is the reason for my life? What does it look like to live a successful life? What is right and wrong? Why do certain things happen? Where are hope, purpose, and motivation to be found? Again, this is not an exhaustive list but representative of the kinds of questions that everybody asks and somehow answers.

Since your thoughts always precede and determine your actions, the theology you carry into times of suffering and trial are very, very important. Let me give you two examples of how bad theology worsens your experience of suffering. The first goes like this: *I am suffering because God is punishing me for my sin.*

Sue had to deal not only with a very serious disease that had invaded her body, but also with paralyzing guilt and shame. Why, you may ask? Because Sue was convinced that her disease was God's punishment for bad choices and decisions she had made. In a time when she needed to run to God, she did her best to hide from him and to hide from his people. She reasoned that her job was to endure the punishment she deserved.

Clearly, thinking like Sue's is rooted in very bad theology. The message of Scripture is that every piece of the guilt, shame, and punishment for our sin was completely and once for all carried

by Christ. This means there is no more condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (see Rom. 8:1–4). So our suffering is not punitive, that is, not a direct punishment for sins we have committed.

How discouraging not only to go through hard and maybe even life-altering circumstances but also to think you are going through those things because you've fallen short of God's standard. It's hard to run to God for help, to rest in his care, to be assured of his love, and to believe that his mercies are constantly available and new every day when you're convinced you're being punished by him. And it's hard to reach out for God's grace when you think he's giving you what you deserve. The Bible never interprets our suffering this way; in fact, it teaches the opposite. Rather than suffering being connected to the bad things we have done, Scripture connects trials and difficulty to the good things God wants for us and is working to produce in us (see James 1:2–4).

The second example flows out of a poor understanding of Romans 8:28, which says, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Sadly, this verse has been interpreted by many to promise that everything you go through will turn out all right in the end. This interpretation leads people to harbor unrealistic expectations of a happy ending to something they are suffering, and in so doing, causes them to think that God has failed to deliver what he has promised when suffering continues or leaves them with lives that are forever altered.

Jim was sure, because of what he had been taught that Romans 8:28 promised, that what he had lost would surely be returned. Because of the fraud of someone he trusted, Jim had lost everything he'd worked for. He went from being a wealthy executive to an hourly laborer, and during the first few years he was motivated by the thought that it would all turn out for the best. But as year lapped upon year, Jim got more discouraged

and angry. He drifted away from his small group and eventually quit going to church altogether. Bitterness with God came from wrongly understood expectations, and those expectations in the end had a much greater impact on Jim's life than the terrible loss he'd suffered.

When people lift Romans 8:28 out of its immediate context, they understand it to mean what it does not mean. The way to understand any single Bible passage is to remember that Scripture interprets Scripture. The key to understanding the true hope of this passage is to understand the "good" that Paul is writing about. Verses 29 and 30 tell us. The "good" that is guaranteed in this passage is our redemption. Even before he made the world, God made the decision that his work in us would be completed no matter what. This means that the grace you and I reach out for in our times of trouble is never shaky or at risk; it is a present expression of a plan that was settled before this world began. It is so good to know that when things in you and around you have been damaged or compromised, nothing can damage, interrupt, or stop your true security, which is found in God and his grace poured out for you. This proper understanding of this wonderful passage gives hope even when you look around and have no hope.

I have given you just two examples of the powerful influence that poor theology will have on the way you suffer through what is already hard on its own. Sue and Jim not only were suffering but were victims of the bad theology that they brought to that difficulty.

2. Doubt of God

Suffering doesn't so much change your heart as expose what has been in your heart all along. Difficulty has an amazing ability to reveal what's inside us. Trials reveal your true thoughts and desires, where you have been looking for life, where you have

sought meaning, and where you have looked to give you hope. Suffering will always expose the true nature of your relationship to and communion with God. I won't say much here, because a later chapter is dedicated to this topic, but your suffering will be all the more painful if you question the presence, promises, goodness, or faithfulness of God.

3. Unrealistic Expectations of Life

I wrote in this first chapter of my unrealistic expectations, but I want to put this topic of unrealistic expectations into two categories that I think linger unrecognized and unaddressed by many. First is the expectation that what is will always be. In Romans 8:21 we read that the world we now live in is in "bondage to corruption." Paul means that decay is an ever-present reality. Nothing remains the same. Bodies grow old, friendships sour, marriages grow distant, churches fall into difficulty, government lurches into corruption. Somehow, someday, all the good things around us are under constant attack. Change is a constant reality. But we all tend to get lulled into thinking that what we have today will be with us tomorrow and the tomorrows that follow.

The second thing concerning expectations is that we tend not to take seriously the dramatic brokenness of the world we live in. Romans 8:22 tells us that we live in a "groaning" world. You groan when you feel weak. You groan when you are in pain. You groan when something has been damaged. You groan when you are discouraged. You groan when you wonder if what has caused you to groan will ever end. You groan when you can't find words to express your cries. If you don't take seriously the groaning condition of our world, you will live with naive expectations of what your life will be, you will be unprepared for the trouble that comes your way, and you will be susceptible to the myriad of temptations that come your way.

4. Unrealistic Expectations of Others

We do forget that everyone around us is a sinner, that no one has consistently correct thoughts, completely pure desires, or regularly pure motives. Even if you're surrounded by believers, it's important to remember that although the dominating power of sin has been broken in them, the presence of sin still remains, even though it is being progressively rooted out by God's grace. That means we are all sinned against, and we all sin against others. All of us deal with relational misunderstanding, conflict, hurt, misjudgment, and rejection.

It never works to turn a person into your personal messiah. It never works to look to another for your identity. It never works to ask people to give you meaning and purpose. It is unrealistic to look to someone for inner peace. It never goes well when you ask another flawed human being to be the source of your happiness. There is an ever-faithful Messiah, and no one around you is capable of taking his place and doing for you what he alone can do.

Suffering is intensified when we elevate people too high in our hearts and then they fail us.

5. Pride

By pride here, I mean not the pride of arrogance but rather the pride of self-reliance. There are many people who, like me, mistake self-confidence for faith in Christ. We're proud of our physical strength and health, our sharp minds, our social abilities, our ability to lead and control, and our successes. In this way we tend to take credit for things we could never produce or achieve on our own. We forget that every cell in our body and every neuron in our brain is dependent on God. We forget that every success we've achieved has depended on forces we could never control, and we forget that all our natural abilities are gifts from God.

Taking too much credit always leads to placing too much trust in yourself.

When you live self-reliantly, and the unexpected, the unplanned, the unwanted, or the painful comes your way, you panic. You panic because suddenly you're faced with your smallness, weakness, and vulnerability. You panic because you feel unprepared and unable. You panic because things are out of your control. You panic because you can't understand or make sense of what is going on. You panic because the way out is unclear. You panic because you just don't know what to do.

Suffering exposes the danger of self-reliance. It reminds us that we were not designed to live independently but in dependence on God and others. This is true not just because sin has entered the world; it was true of Adam and Eve in a perfect world, because it's how God designed people to live.

6. *Materialism*

This word begs definition. By *materialism*, I don't mean that you're chasing after the idol of material things, that you're always craving the next physical thing. I'm thinking here of our tendency to place too much of our security and hope in physical things, in our house and possessions or the health of our body or in our job, bank account, or retirement plan.

Every human being looks to something for security. When you've looked to physical things for your security, and those things fail you or are taken away, you lose that fundamental sense of well-being that everyone longs for. I can't tell you how many people I've counseled who lost themselves when they lost their job.

The only safe place to look for a sturdy well-being of heart is the Creator. The material things God created can never do for you what only God can do. When you've been asking material things to give you what they were never meant to give, the loss

of those things will be an even more crushing blow than the physical loss.

7. Selfism

As I've said and written before, the DNA of sin is selfishness (see 2 Cor. 5:15). Sin causes us to stick ourselves in the center of our world and make life all about us. It causes us to reduce the field of our daily concerns to the small agenda of our wants, our needs, and our feelings. Sin causes us to be driven by selfish desires, a spirit of entitlement, and a silent list of demands. Sin causes us to want our own way, to want sovereignty over things we weren't designed to control, and to want to coerce others into the service of our agenda. None of us, this side of eternity, is able to completely escape the self-ism of sin. This heart tendency toward functional me-ism always makes suffering more difficult.

Suffering confronts us with the fact that life is not about us but about God. It is not about our glory but his. It's not first about our pleasure but about his. It's not about our plans for us but about his will for us. It's not about our control but his. It's not about our little kingdoms but about his. It's not about our successes but about the display of his majesty.

If life were about us and controlled by us, we would see to it that we never suffer. The crisis of faith that often accompanies suffering is the result of a collision between our will and God's will and our glory and his glory. In our selfishness we can't see suffering of any kind as good, so we begin to question whether God, who has allowed it into our lives, is good. Putting yourself in the center will make the trouble you face all the more troublesome.



Sarah was facing very hard things. She had been plotted against and abandoned by her husband, she had lost custody of her children, and she had been left financially destitute. What had been done to her was horribly wrong, but her emotional and spiritual devastation was the result not only of the terrible wrongs that had been done to her but also of critical beliefs that she had carried into those wrongs. Sarah was a believer, but at street level, God was neither the source of her security nor her hope. She had married into wealth and luxury; she had a beautiful house and a great circle of friends. It was the good life, not the gospel, that got her up every morning. It was all the things around her and all the things she experienced that made her happy. The gospel of Jesus Christ was her theology but didn't provide security for her heart or drive the way that she lived. She understood that she had been forgiven by grace and would spend an eternity with the Lord, but there was a huge gap in the middle of her grasp of the gospel. So her life became her personal messiah, giving her what it was never meant to give.

When Henry walked out never to return and took literally everything with him, Sarah didn't lose just Henry, the house, and the kids—she lost herself. As I listened to Sarah talk, I realized that what made this horrible sin against her even more devastating was that in losing all these things, Sarah lost her functional savior, and in losing her functional savior, she lost her will to go on. And it was when Sarah got hold of this truth that her heart began to lift, her hope began to return, and she decided to live again.

It really is true that we never come empty-handed to any experience. And we surely always drag something into the suffering that enters our door. What about you? What are you carrying around that has the power to cause you to trouble your own trouble? What has the power to allow you to forget that no matter what painful thing you're enduring, as God's child it's impossible for you to endure it all by yourself? The One who

created this world and rules it with wisdom, righteousness, and love is in you, with you, and for you, and nothing has the power to separate you from his love.

Review and Reflect

1. How are trust and identity connected? What have you put your trust in other than God?
2. Paul Tripp writes, “We should fear our delusion of strength” (p. 29). Considering the chapter as a whole, what does this mean?
3. “Scripture works to prepare us, not so we would live in fear, but so we will be ready for the things we will all face” (p. 30). Identify some passages or biblical stories to cling to in moments of suffering.
4. Have you questioned God regarding your suffering because you’ve thought it was punishment? What Scripture verses refute this belief?
5. Consider the things that can be brought to your suffering (poor theology, doubt of God, unrealistic expectations of life and of others, pride, materialism, and selfism). Pray that the Lord would expose your weakness and dependency and show you his care.

Heart Reset

- Romans 8:1–4
- 2 Corinthians 12:9
- James 1:2–4