

# *Suffering*

*Gospel Hope When Life  
Doesn't Make Sense*

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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*Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*

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

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# 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?

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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