

“When people are hurting they need biblical answers, not platitudes. Here the editors and authors have thoroughly combed the Scriptures to give us the answers we need in tough times. This book should help both those who are suffering and those called upon to comfort and encourage others in their suffering.”

—Jerry Bridges, author, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*

“The skeptic chides: ‘If God is good, he is not God; if God is God, he is not good.’ With Scripture to answer the pain of real-life questions, and with real-life pain to question Scripture, these theologians address the hardest questions with honesty, tenderness, and deep truth.”

—Bryan Chapell, President, Covenant Seminary

“Those who read this book will thank the gifted team of authors for their careful, biblical, theological, philosophical, and ethical engagement with the problem of suffering and evil. This timely book addresses these crucial and challenging issues with clarity, conviction, and pastoral sensitivity. Readers will be strengthened, edified, and encouraged. I highly recommend this most important book.”

—David S. Dockery, President, Union University

“Morgan and Peterson have assembled a fine community of biblical scholars and theologians, all committed to Christ and the church, to address the problem of suffering. There are no easy answers to this problem, but there are plenty of wrong answers, misunderstandings, and confusion. This book—this community—will point you in the right direction.”

—Stephen J. Nichols, Research Professor of Christianity and Culture,
Lancaster Bible College

“This volume should be warmly embraced by readers anxious to receive realistic good news from the Bible on this perennially-important subject. The writers are biblical, pastoral, reflective, and honest. I am grateful for their helpful and theologically-rich analysis.”

—Paul R. House, Associate Dean and Professor of Divinity,
Beeson Divinity School

“Chapter by chapter, the authors root and ground their reflections in Scripture, modeling how to move from biblical exposition to a biblical theology. The reflections are not only theoretical and necessary but also practically engaging. There is much wisdom in this work, and it is my prayer that it will become must-reading for every serious Christian who wants to learn afresh how to handle God’s Word rightly for today’s church and to proclaim the gospel powerfully to today’s world.”

—Stephen J. Wellum, Professor of Christian Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Suffering
and the
Goodness
of God

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THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY

A series edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson

Volume 1

Suffering and the Goodness of God

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Christopher W. Morgan
and Robert A. Peterson

EDITORS

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To our parents, Bill and Karen Morgan
and Arthur (deceased) and Marjorie Peterson

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Series Preface



Theology in Community

As the series name *Theology in Community* indicates, *theology* in community aims to promote clear thinking on and godly responses to historic and contemporary theological issues. The series examines issues central to the Christian faith, including traditional topics such as sin, the atonement, the church, and heaven, but also some which are more focused or contemporary, such as suffering and the goodness of God, the glory of God, the deity of Christ, and the kingdom of God. The series strives not only to follow a sound theological method but also to display it.

Chapters addressing the Old and New Testaments on the book's subject form the heart of each volume. Subsequent chapters synthesize the biblical teaching and link it to historical, philosophical, systematic, and pastoral concerns. Far from being mere collections of essays, the volumes are carefully crafted so that the voices of the various experts combine to proclaim a unified message.

Again, as the name suggests, *theology in community* also seeks to demonstrate that theology should be done in teams. The teachings of the Bible were forged in real-life situations by leaders in God's covenant communities. The biblical teachings addressed concerns of real people who needed the truth to guide their lives. Theology was formulated by the church and for the church. This series seeks to recapture that biblical reality. The volumes are written by scholars, from a variety of denominational backgrounds

and life experiences with academic credentials and significant expertise across the spectrum of theological disciplines, who collaborate with each other. They write from a high view of Scripture with robust evangelical conviction and in a gracious manner. They are not detached academics but are personally involved in ministry, serving as teachers, pastors, and missionaries. The contributors to these volumes stand in continuity with the historic church, care about the global church, share life together with other believers in local churches, and aim to write for the good of the church to strengthen its leaders, particularly pastors, teachers, missionaries, lay leaders, students, and professors.

For the glory of God and the good of the church,
Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson

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Chris's colleagues Don Dunavant and Jeff Mooney and students Matt Leonard and David Massey for reading sections of the manuscript.

Contributors

David B. Calhoun (Ph.D., Princeton Theological Seminary), Professor of Church History, Covenant Theological Seminary

William Edgar (Dr. Théol., Université de Genève), Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

John S. Feinberg (Ph.D., University of Chicago), Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

John M. Frame (M.Phil., Yale University), Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Ph.D., Brandeis University), Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and President Emeritus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Dan G. McCartney (Ph.D., Westminster Theological Seminary), Professor of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

Christopher W. Morgan (Ph.D., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary), Professor of Theology, California Baptist University

Robert A. Peterson (Ph.D., Drew University), Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

Robert W. Yarbrough (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen), Associate Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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Introduction

CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN
AND ROBERT A. PETERSON

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As we write these words, five hundred thousand Southern California residents, including two of Chris’s colleagues, have evacuated their homes due to raging fires. Destruction and loss will hit some severely, others minimally. Thankfully, most involved will suffer little; just the inconvenience of staying at a hotel or friend’s house and headaches from minor smoke inhalation. Others, however, will lose their homes and keepsakes. Some will suffer the excruciating pain of being burned by fire, while a few will undergo a much deeper pain of losing loved ones.

In a few months, another tragedy will take center stage, and all but a few will move on, and in time the event will become a distant memory. Yet some calamities are so massive that they remain permanently etched in our minds. These events often compel us to raise questions about suffering and good and evil.

Some of these heartbreaking events occur on a national scale. Recall September 11, 2001. The September 12 edition of *The New York Times* was filled with related stories, including: “New York firefighters, impelled by instinct and training, rushed to the World Trade Center yesterday to evacuate victims. Then the buildings fell down. The firefighters never came out. More than 300 firefighters were unaccounted for when the day ended.”¹

1. Jane Fritsch, “A Day of Terror: The Response; Rescue Workers Rush In, and Many Do Not Return,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2001.

Commemorating the sixth anniversary, the *Times* ran an article simply called “September 11, 2001”:

It was the day when the unreal became the unimaginable. September 11, 2001, the crystalline morning when planes dropped from the skies and toppled the World Trade Center and punctured a hole in the Pentagon, was a demarcation point that shattered the security of the country and introduced a nebulous and virulent enemy previously unfamiliar to most citizens. Nearly 3,000 people died that morning, the vast majority of them in the gnarled rubble of the Lower Manhattan towers, others at the Pentagon and in a rural Pennsylvania field. A numbed country with red-rimmed eyes came to understand the ugly menace of terrorism. . . .

It was a day that marked the start of another time that, six years later, has had an aftermath but not an end.²

Other tragic events play out on the global stage. A few years later we saw another gruesome event. Germany’s *Deutsche Welle* announced, “Asia Marks Tsunami Anniversary, Still Struggles to Rebuild.”

Aid from the West . . . is helping Asian countries come back from the deadly tsunami of 2004. But the effects of the giant waves are still being felt. Remembrances are being held across Asia today on the two-year anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami whose devastating waves killed 230,000 people across the region and left millions homeless. Many parts of the region are still struggling to recover from the catastrophe, even as new floods and landslides in Indonesia are again forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes. . . .

On December 26, 2004, a 9.0-magnitude earthquake off the shore of the Indonesian province Aceh triggered giant waves that fanned out across the Indian Ocean. The tsunami took nearly 230,000 lives and left around two million people homeless in 13 nations, including Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

The tsunami extended as far as the African continent, causing destruction in Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania, as well as on Madagascar. Many of the survivors lost their children; most lost their homes.³

Such events evoke questions in all of us. Australia’s *Sydney Morning Herald* observed this tendency in an article published a few days after the destructive tsunami, “Waves of Destruction Wash Away Belief in God’s Benevolence”:

2. N. R. Kleinfield, “September 11, 2001,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2007.

3. “Asia Marks Tsunami Anniversary, Still Struggles to Rebuild,” *Deutsche Welle*, December 12, 2006.

“Why did you do this to us, God? What did we do to upset you?” asked a woman in India this week, a heart-wrenching question asked in common these past few days by Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. Nothing could have prepared us for what happened when the tsunami unleashed its terror. So we seek answers where answers are hard to come by, in either secular or sacred realms.⁴

Who can contemplate such devastation and loss for long? Our hearts become numb and our thinking seems futile.

While global and national tragedies trouble us, those that hit closer to home keep us awake at night. There was a period in Chris’s life when it seemed to be dangerous to be his friend. The two-year-old son of one of his best friends, a pastor, was diagnosed with a brain tumor and given little time to live. Another missionary friend and his family were worshipping the Lord in Pakistan when terrorists bombed their church, injuring them and others with shrapnel. The twenty-five-year-old fiancé of a close friend was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease and needed chemotherapy. The daughter, a church secretary and children’s Sunday school teacher, of one of Chris’s deacons was murdered by her jealous ex-husband and left two young girls motherless. Time and time again tragedy struck his closest of friends. During that same two-year period Chris grieved over the suicides of two people to whom he had sought to minister. One was a young man who was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Chris became his friend, shared the gospel with him, and tried to help him, but to no avail. He imitated his father and shot himself on his twenty-sixth birthday. The suicide note, rambling and incoherent, was addressed to Chris. The other young man struggled with depression and drug addiction. Chris witnessed to him and drove him to the psychiatrist on a number of occasions. Sadly, late one night Chris received a phone call from the young man’s screaming grandmother. Chris drove to her home and found the twenty-eight-year-old hanging from the ceiling. Chris lowered him down, checked his pulse, and tried to revive him but was unsuccessful.

In the past two years Robert has known many sufferers too. The bright, successful daughter of members of his church small group suddenly became afflicted with headaches so severe that she had to drop out of college. Only extensive jaw surgery brought hope of relief, and only time will tell how successful it has been. Robert’s son, Curtis, grieved with other friends the loss of a former high school classmate who, when he stopped

4. Edward Spence, “Waves of Destruction Wash Away Belief in God’s Benevolence,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 30, 2004.

to help a stranded motorist, was killed by a car that swerved off the road. A dedicated church leader, friend, and rocket scientist (no kidding) was struck down by pancreatic cancer and died within four months, leaving behind a widow and two children. Robert's father succumbed to Alzheimer's and passed away after suffering the debilitating effects of the disease for fourteen years. After longing for a child, a couple who attend the seminary where Robert teaches were elated at the birth of a beautiful daughter only to be crushed by the realization that she suffers from an aggressive form of leukemia that required chemotherapy one month after her birth. Robert's wife has become close friends with a woman whose former husband, a godly and powerful preacher, committed suicide after being unable to cope with clinical depression that resulted from the amputation of a leg due to a freak accident.

Along with much pain, suffering frequently brings many questions and overall confusion. After all, why do bad things happen to good people? Why would God allow his people to suffer injustice? Why is there such apparent inequity in suffering? Why do some people seem to get off lightly while others endure one crushing blow after another? How are we to understand God in light of these terrible realities? How are we to respond when suffering comes to our door? How can we help others who are experiencing pain?

Such questions are not new. In fact, many biblical figures faced them while suffering—including Job at the hands of his friends; Joseph, who knew the rejection of being sold into slavery by his own brothers; Jeremiah who knew oppression and physical abuse from the very Israelites to whom God sent him to preach; James, the son of Zebedee, whom Herod Agrippa I beheaded; Paul, who endured beatings, stoning, shipwreck, physical deprivation, and untold anxiety; and Peter, whom early church tradition says was crucified upside down.

We too at one time or another will all experience suffering, either personally or vicariously through those we love. The form suffering takes and its degree may vary, but we will all be acquainted with it. This means that we all bring specific questions out of our own experience to this book and therefore will seek different kinds of answers. Philosophers and theologians wonder how suffering can be consistent with God's sovereignty and goodness, and the reality of evil. Pastors want to know what the Bible says about suffering so they can teach accurately and help others respond appropriately. Missionaries query how and why God sometimes advances his gospel through persecution. Friends or family members of sufferers want to know how to comfort them. And believers who are experiencing

suffering want to know why God allows it, how they can survive it, and how they are to respond to it.

Each person described can find some help in this book. We hope it will assist not because we claim to have perfect answers to these extraordinarily difficult questions. No, on this side of heaven, suffering will remain mysterious. Pat answers do not suffice, and indeed they often only add to the hurt. Nevertheless, while the Bible does not tell us everything we would like to know about suffering, it does teach much about it. After all, we know in part (1 Cor. 13:9). The Bible offers us much insight into who God is, who we are, where evil and suffering ultimately come from, how Christ suffered for us, how we are united to him even in his sufferings, how we are to respond to suffering, and how suffering fits within the larger biblical story. Such truths are not magic wands that erase our pain, wipe away our fears, and answer all of our questions. But when joined with a loving church, strength from the indwelling Holy Spirit, and dependence on the Lord, biblical teachings help significantly.

The contributors to this volume bring a variety of expertise and experiences to this weighty subject. They are highly accomplished academically in various disciplines: Old Testament, New Testament, theology, church history, and philosophy. Three have written books on suffering. The contributors write as professors, pastors, church leaders, and missionaries. And though all of them have experienced a measure of suffering themselves, been close to those who suffer, and ministered to sufferers, two in particular write out of difficult and lengthy personal battles with suffering. For almost twenty years, David Calhoun has been battling cancer, and for the same length of time, John Feinberg has been taking care of his wife who has Huntington's chorea, a terrible disease that gradually claims the minds and bodies of its victims.

Robert Yarbrough begins *Suffering and the Goodness of God* by placing the issue in contemporary perspective through eleven insightful observations. Walter Kaiser then interacts extensively with the Old Testament material, and Dan McCartney does the same with the New Testament teachings. Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson seek to illuminate suffering by locating it within the larger biblical story. Upon that exegetical and biblical theological foundation, John Frame explores the philosophical and theological issues related to the "problem of evil." William Edgar then urges the church both to understand and to address the evil of oppression in our world today. The final two chapters concentrate on personal suffering. David Calhoun recounts how God uses Christian poetry to encourage

him in the face of cancer, while John Feinberg offers personal reflections on accompanying his wife in her journey of terrible suffering.

In sum, *Suffering and the Goodness of God* examines contemporary questions, interprets key biblical texts, recounts the overall biblical story, addresses central issues in theology and philosophy, speaks to church and individual concerns, engages personal, pastoral, and academic questions, and offers hope through testimonies of God's sustaining grace.

We pray that you will experience the comfort and hope found in the Lord that the apostle Paul testifies to in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.