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GROW BEST
IN WINTER?

LIGON DUNCAN

WITH J. NICHOLAS REID



P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

WHILE I WAS ATTENDING the funeral of a friend who had died in a car wreck, I overheard the presiding minister—who, by the way, never knew my friend—say to some mourners in a condescending tone before the service began, “You know this is a joyous occasion, as well.” On the one hand, the minister was correct. When a believer dies and goes to be with the Lord, there is cause for joy. The problem, on the other hand, comes when we act as if grief and sorrow are somehow sub-Christian emotions.

But that is not how the Bible handles suffering. The Bible consistently addresses the issue of suffering with the sincerity such a topic deserves, all the while offering gospel balm and comfort to the soul of the sufferer.

The problem with the way many Christians treat suffering is that they simply attempt to put a happy face on trials. A little personal suffering, however, goes a long way in revealing how vacuous careless platitudes can be. The issue of suffering is not to be treated in a

PREFACE

cold and pedantic manner. Suffering is real and not something to be handled several steps removed. Yet if we address suffering merely subjectively, without focusing on the objective truths of the Bible, then there is all the reason in the world to despair.

Does Grace Grow Best in Winter? attempts to navigate these choppy waters and handle the issue of suffering as the Bible does, recognizing the difficulty of suffering, but also seeing a sovereign and good God at work in the midst of hardship.

A number of people have helped us with this book along the way and deserve our thanks. We would like to thank Dr. Guy Waters for reading an early version of this work and offering helpful feedback. We also thank Weezie Polk and Shirley Windham for reading the manuscript, and Donna Dobbs for crafting the study questions. Furthermore, we thank the session and members of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, where these chapters were delivered by Ligon Duncan in lecture form. Finally, we thank Marvin Padgett, Thom Notaro, and the dear folks at P&R Publishing for taking on this work.

Our prayer is that God will use this study to enable his people to glorify and enjoy him even in the midst of suffering.

J. Nicholas Reid

I

WHY ME?



THIS BOOK CONSIDERS suffering in light of the sovereignty of our wise and loving God.¹ Since we believe that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28), we will ask, How does God intend suffering to work for his children's good? God doesn't waste the suffering of his children, so how does he use suffering? In what ways do we grow in suffering? How do we respond to suffering?

We begin with the quandary of suffering: Why is there pain and sorrow in the first place? We live in a world of hurt. It is a constant. If we were able to know for a split second all the hardship that people face in

this world at any given time, it would probably drive us mad. Only God could take in such knowledge without going insane.

Today three thousand little children will die of malaria, most of them in Africa. There will be numerous mothers and fathers bereft by the loss of their children because of this one disease.

This year alone, 1.5 million people will die in Africa because of AIDS. Fifty million people die every year, many of disease, and most young and in agony. One hundred people have died since you began reading this book. Think of the pain their loved ones feel in the wake of those deaths.

A little closer to home, you yourself may be suffering because of family issues. Perhaps estrangement from a parent has haunted you all your life, leaving you with the longing for a father or a mother to say just once, "I love you, and I'm proud of you. You bring me great joy and delight." But it never comes.

Perhaps you are a parent loving and caring for your child, all the while that child is making self-destructive choices that will have disastrous effects on his or her future. As a parent, you are doing the best you can. You are helping and counseling, but ultimately, there is nothing more that you can do except watch and pray.

Maybe the problem is with your marriage. You would never have dreamed that your marriage would

break up, yet it has. Sometimes it happens for reasons that are understandable, and other times not. Either way the heartbreak is unbearable.

Suffering is such a part of this life that there is no way we could even begin to touch on every possible scenario.

SUFFERING HAPPENS

We need to learn that suffering happens. Or more specifically, suffering is to be expected. It is the norm in this fallen world. Many people claiming to be Christian teachers say that suffering should not be happening to you. But the Bible and experience prove that suffering is the norm in this fallen creation. In the world that God originally made there was no suffering, but our world is filled with it because sin brought suffering in its wake.

Understanding that suffering happens is important, not only because there are some who tell us that suffering should not to be a part of the Christian experience, but also because we have, by and large, been spared many of the trials that the rest of humanity has had to face. For instance, most of us have never lived through a famine, but up until the twentieth century most people would have lived through a number of them.

WHY ME?

Since we live during a time in which some of the sufferings of this world have been mitigated for us, we are lulled to sleep sometimes and are surprised by suffering. When pain comes into our experience, our initial reaction is, “Oh, this shouldn’t be happening!” But if what I am saying is true (that suffering is, that suffering happens, that suffering is the norm for this fallen world), none of us should ever be surprised by suffering. Instead, when it comes our way, we ought to be saying: “I’ve been waiting and preparing for you. I knew you were coming, because this fallen world is full of the likes of you. I’ve been preparing, by God’s grace and by God’s Word, to glorify God as I experience you.” We must get it ingrained into our minds that suffering is an essential part of the Christian experience. You will suffer. That’s the first thing you need to know. The question remains, will you suffer in a way that honors Christ?

LEARNING TO SUFFER WELL

Christians need to learn to suffer well. In order to do so, we need to consider what the Bible teaches Christians to do in the midst of suffering.

Admiral Nelson won the great Battle of Trafalgar against the French during the Napoleonic Wars. The Viscount of Camperdown, who also won many battles

during that period, was one of the admirals under Nelson. The Viscount of Camperdown's family crest had a ship with full sails on it and with two little Latin words: *Disce pati*—"Learn to suffer." That is precisely what Peter and Paul and Job and Moses and Jesus would say to you and me as believers in this fallen world. "Learn to suffer."

What do I mean by that? Let me put some feet on it by offering five things in particular you and I need to learn about how to suffer.

1. *Magnify Jesus.* You must learn to suffer in such a way that Jesus is magnified in your difficulty. If you do not approach suffering with a desire for Jesus to be magnified, then you will encounter some hardship in this world that will completely overwhelm you because of its magnitude. When you are facing a long and enduring struggle, you need to be equipped with something bigger to fight against it, and there is nothing bigger than the glory of Jesus Christ. Your desire to see Jesus magnified is one of your great weapons in the war against suffering. You must learn how to suffer in such a way that Christ will be great in your eyes and in the eyes of all who see your suffering.

2. *Love him more.* Learn to suffer in such a way that Jesus becomes more precious to you than before. If

you endure suffering, and Jesus is not more precious to you on the other side, then your suffering has not yet come to full fruition. Every single experience, good or ill, is designed by our loving heavenly Father to cause us to prize Jesus Christ more and more.

3. *Know that God is for you.* You need to learn to suffer in absolute confidence that God is for you. But I should qualify this statement. If you are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation as he is offered in the gospel, you can endure suffering in absolute confidence that God is for you. Do not take my word for it. I am saying it on the authority of God's Word. You need to learn to suffer in full confidence that God is for you and that nothing can happen to you apart from his will.

Jesus made this point to his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount. Paul made this point to the suffering Christians in Romans 8. Peter made this point to the Christians who were getting ready to experience a great empire-wide persecution. You need to know that even in your darkest days God is still 100 percent for you. He is not against you, and everything that you need to endure, you already possess in Christ Jesus. But this truth is easier to say than it is to believe. It is easier to profess the truth than it is to rest in the truth during some difficult and dark time. But you need to begin a journey toward fully embracing it even in your darkest hour.

4. *Rest on grace.* Suffering does not gain you acceptance from God. Learn to suffer knowing that you are accepted by grace through faith, apart from anything that you do either before or after your conversion. There are some people who, for a variety of reasons, seem to think that if they just endure enough suffering, God will love them a little more. Such a perspective fails to recognize that God has loved his people with an everlasting love and that acceptance by him is not a result of our deeds or our suffering. We are accepted only because of Christ and his work on our behalf; this is important for us to understand in the midst of suffering. During intense and long suffering, the mind can become numb and begin to think all sorts of crazy things. If there is even a hint of doubt in the back of your mind about how you stand accepted with God, Satan will use it to undermine your comfort and assurance as you face suffering.

5. *Embrace suffering.* Learn to embrace a life of suffering. Paul describes himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10a). If we are a band of brothers and sisters over whom the banner is unfurled and flowing, “Suffering, yet rejoicing,” there is no telling the gospel witness and effect it will have on the world around us. Talk about shaking the world out of its slumber—if we were a band of brothers and sisters in Christ dying yet living, suffering yet

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rejoicing, sorrowful yet full of inexpressible joy, what a comfort it would be to us, what a glory it would be to God, and what a witness it would be to the world. Be prepared to embrace a life of suffering.

BALM FOR THE SUFFERING SOUL

The good news if you are suffering today is that the Bible says so much about what you are going through. I've had the privilege—and I really mean *privilege*—of talking with many people in my church who have suffered through things that I have never experienced. During those times, if all I had to say to those individuals came from my own wisdom, books, or my meager experience, it would be utterly pathetic and depressing. But thank the Lord that you do not have to rely on my wisdom or common sense or experience, or anyone else's for that matter. Instead, the Word of God is waiting with wisdom and comfort for you in the midst of your difficulty. God has said much in his Word to you about your suffering, and it is my inestimable privilege of opening up his Word and saying, "Friend, look at the feast of help that God has prepared for you in his Word. It does not come from me! It does not come from my experience. It does not come from my wisdom. It comes from God!"