

# THE *Possibility* OF PAIN

*How Suffering Invites Us  
to Go Deeper With God*

BY NANCY GUTHRIE

There was a lump in my throat as we walked down the hospital corridor, returning to a place of pain that I thought I had left behind for good. It was a year and a half after we'd buried our daughter, Hope, who was with us a short six months due to a rare genetic disorder.

Evidently my husband's vasectomy failed, and we were shocked to discover that I was pregnant again. But we weren't just shocked. We were afraid, knowing that any child of ours faced a 25 percent chance of having the same fatal syndrome.

Several weeks later, we received the prenatal testing results and began to prepare not only to love but also to lose another child. In those days, as I anticipated what was ahead, I began to pray, "Lord, teach me everything You have for me in this — just don't let this pain be wasted in my life." I wanted Him to use it — every tear and every tearing away — for something good.

**GROWING THROUGH PAIN** | It's the seemingly senseless suffering, the wasted pain, the meaningless loss that is most difficult to bear. The only thing that quiets our questions about the purposes of God in our suffering is the confidence that He will use it for our good and His glory. God can use the physical pain that does not subside, the relational pain that puts us on edge, and the emotional pain that brings us to tears to get our attention and turn our focus toward Him.

We begin with prayers for our pain to be removed.

And as He works in us, our prayers change to asking for our pain to be redeemed. Through our suffering we hear God's gentle invitation to go further with Him than we have ever gone before.

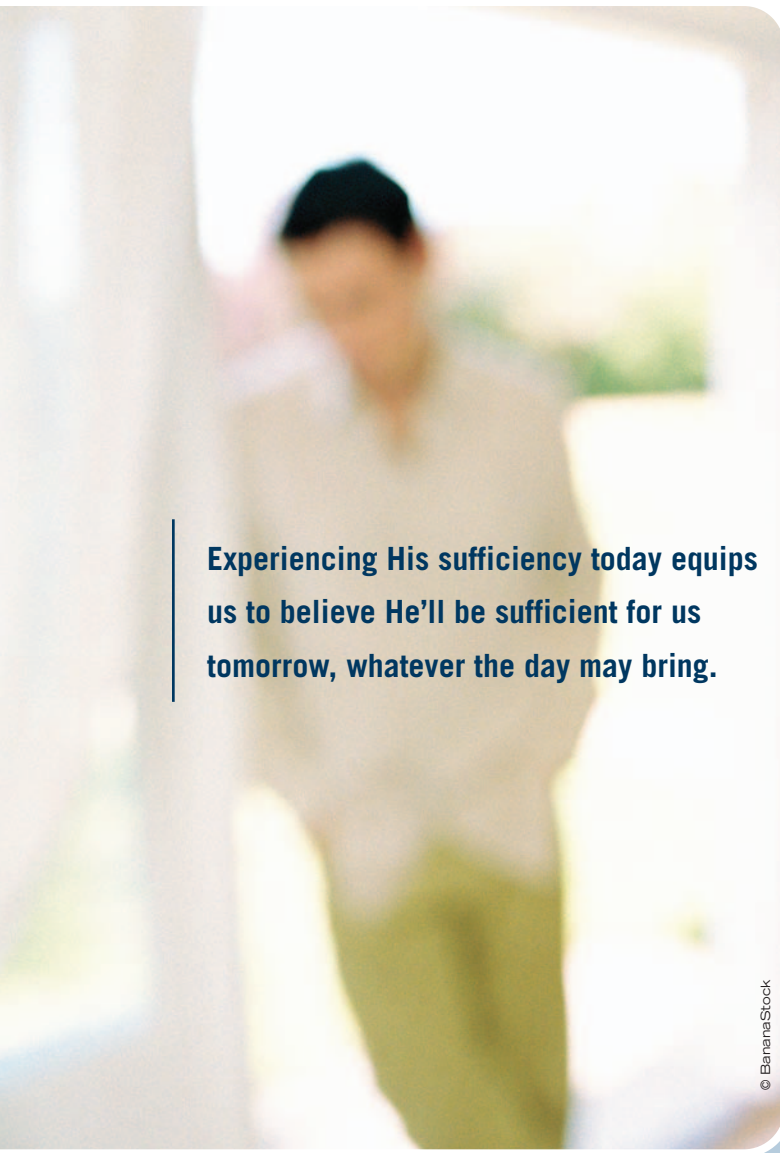
**Suffering can help us become spiritually mature.**

Nobody wants to suffer. In fact, most of us would admit that we've spent most of our lives seeking to *avoid* suffering. But suffering should not surprise us. God's method of choice to grow us up spiritually is not simply attending Bible studies or accumulating spiritual knowledge; it's suffering. But suffering itself doesn't do the job. It is how we respond to the suffering that determines if pain will become fertile ground for growth. Growth comes when we respond to the major heartaches and minor difficulties in our lives with an attitude of endurance that pushes us to trust God in new and deeper ways.

**Suffering calls us to submit.** Most of us don't particularly like the word *submission*, let alone the practice of it. But there's a difference between merely surviving suffering and submitting to it. C.S. Lewis wrote, "There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'"

For me, submission has meant a quiet, though sorrowful, acceptance. It has meant giving up my plans for my family and life and submitting them to God. And the call to submission hasn't stopped. Every day I'm called

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to let go of my dreams and my desires. Some days I do better than others. But because I believe God's plans are better than my own, instead of running from the path set before me, I desire to run toward it.

We can choose to hold tightly to our dreams and demand our "rights" to a comfortable life. Or we can experience the joy and freedom of saying to God, "I'm Yours. Have Your way with me." What a relief it is to stop fighting and start submitting!

**Suffering shows us the sufficiency of God's grace.** I'm glad the Apostle Paul wrote about his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). We don't know what it was, but we do know that Paul repeatedly begged God to take it away; yet instead of offering a cure, God offered Himself, saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

There was a time in my life when I read God's response to Paul in this passage as a dismissive pat on the head. That was before I desperately needed that grace and found it to be wholly sufficient to meet my needs. Now I thoroughly believe that the grace God provides is all we need for whatever we face, delivered in the form and quantity and timing our circumstances require.

His grace is enough to enable us to endure rejection and betrayal without becoming bitter, enough to generate joy in the midst of great sorrow, enough to endure loneliness and reminders of loss everywhere we turn. It's enough to empower us to believe in God's love and goodness. Experiencing His sufficiency today equips us to believe He'll be sufficient for us tomorrow, whatever the day may bring.

## The Answer to Pain by Michael Card

What we need most ... is never what we think we need. What we were created at the depths of our souls to need is only the Presence of God. It is the answer, as Jesus is the answer.

After the Resurrection, whenever Jesus spoke of His imminent departure to go and be with the Father, His disciples would inevitably lament, "Why can't you stay with us?"

Jesus' remarkable answer is found in John 14. There He resonates with their sorrow. "Don't let your hearts be troubled," He comforts. "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you."

By their very nature, it would be impossible for either God the Father or Jesus the Son not to be with us. So the Spirit, the Comforter, who comes today in response to all our laments, still provides the only answer that will ever be enough, whether we realize it or not.

Rarely does He move to solve the problem. Something else that we don't understand must be taking place. What lament would have us understand is that the answer is being graciously given: His Presence is always with us.

Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence. The language of lament gives a meaningful form to our grief by providing a vocabulary for our suffering and then offering it to God as worship. Our questions and complaints will never find individual answers (even as Job's questions were never fully answered). The only Answer is the dangerous, disturbing, comforting Presence, which is the true answer to all our questions and hopes.

*Taken from A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching out to God in the Lost Language of Lament by Michael Card (NavPress).*

**Suffering shows us what faith looks like.** Why did the biblical writers repeatedly encourage joy in the midst of suffering? On the surface such instructions can seem ridiculous and out of touch. For example, Peter wrote, "You rejoice in this, though for a short time you have had to be distressed by various trials" (1 Peter 1:6).

What could make us joyful when our worst nightmare becomes our reality? The joy comes in discovering that the faith to which we've given lip service is deeper than mere words, and more importantly, the Object of our faith is real and reliable.

When we suffer, it's as if we step onto a stage, the curtain is pulled back, and the world sees if our faith is for real. When we trust instead of fear, we reveal true faith. When we accept rather than complain, forgive rather than seek revenge, and choose humility instead of proving we're right, it shows authentic faith, giving others the opportunity to see it put into action.

**Suffering helps us savor the promise of heaven.** My husband, David, often said that our daughter, Hope, and our son, Gabriel, were not born for this life but for the next. They were unable to see or hear or function in this world and were ushered quickly into the next. Their brief lives opened our eyes to the reality that this life, for all of us, is preparation for the next.

Suffering and sorrow in this life invites us to set our sights on heaven, to anchor our thoughts and our heart's desires beyond the ordinary things of this earth. This life is not all there is, and neither is it the best there is. Our suffering reminds us that there is something better, somewhere better, Someone better than any thing, any place, or any person who has captured our devotion in the here and now. Our greatest hope is not in a long, comfortable life on this earth, but in our forever life with Christ.

While David and I have often wondered about the purposes of God in our lives, we have confidence that our pain has not been wasted, and this has made our loss bearable. God has used our sorrow to mature our faith, demonstrate His own faithfulness, and enlarge our compassion for hurting people around us. Out of His kindness, God gives me something He is not obligated to give — glimpses of how He is using our loss in the lives of people we haven't even met. In each fellow sufferer's story I hear or letter I receive, I hear God whisper, "See — your pain has not been wasted. I'm using it for good." 🙏

*Nancy Guthrie is the author of Holding on to Hope: A Pathway Through Suffering to the Heart of God, as well as the newly released One-Year Book of Hope, a daily devotional written especially for those who seek to grow closer to God through grief and pain.*



## Surrendering the Spotlight

Nothing puts us in the spotlight quite like significant suffering. Our needs become others' concerns, and our issues become the constant topic of conversation. An unexpected problem with such attention is that it can be addictive. We can find ourselves hooked on the attention, endlessly hungry for sympathy and significance. Here's how we can step out of the spotlight:

- Be aware of subtle attention seeking. Do you find yourself looking for opportunities to turn conversations toward your pain? Instead, stay quiet or ask someone else about their experience. Find satisfaction in focusing on others.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice. While we don't think someone else's happiness should keep them from sharing our sorrow, we can sometimes see our sadness as an exemption from being joyful with others. Be purposeful in celebrating the joys of other people in spite of your sorrow.
- Give grace to those who say the wrong thing or nothing at all. We can be prickly and sensitive about the things people say in their attempt to comfort. Or we can choose to see them reaching for a connection, wanting to show they care even though they haven't the words to express it well.
- Use suffering as an opportunity to turn the spotlight on Jesus. Hardship often allows us to share our faith in unexpected places. Be authentic, expressing real fears and failures along with a desire to trust God, know God, and see Him at work in your suffering.