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Introduction

“God does not promise us a smooth flight but He does promise a safe landing.” These words came from a pastor friend, who had a nervous breakdown and lost everything that he had thought near and dear except his faith. His ministries, his marriage, his family, his self-respect, all were history. With nothing left but faith in God, he returned to rebuild a successful life in ministry to others. But wasn’t faith in God to be our assurance that bad things would not rob us of life, liberty, and happiness? Could a loving God allow a faithful servant to suffer as this young man suffered? As Americans we have grown up with the idea that life was fair, it should be fun, and if we played our cards right, it could just about be free.

Until the events of Sept. 11, 2001 the greatest threat of flying was largely one of inconvenience to passengers who may face delays, cancellations, or a bumpy ride. After Sept. 11, the threat involved the real possibility that a high-jacked flight might mean mass destruction of life and property. Many of us have found that we do not have to board a plane to be at risk for a life threatening flight in life. Many of us have been terrorized by the presence of the valley of the shadow of death – for a long time it was USSR, then Y2K, AIDS, SARS, and who knows what will be the next toxic ingredient to pour out of our alphabet soup from hell. We are all at risk to suffer in a fallen world. If we expect life to be a safe place, we make a great mistake. The unavoidable presence of suffering is the bad news. The good news is that the experience of suffering offers special opportunities for spiritual formation.

I have had the privilege of pasturing a large congregation near the campuses of the University of North Carolina and Duke for nearly three decades. I saw the church grow from a hand-full of students to well over a thousand worshipers and in that time I had the honor of walking with people through the most formative years of their lives as they passed through these great universities. During the time of my pastoral ministry, I observed a shift in emphasis with respect to the issue of human suffering. In the early years (1970’s and 80’s), the pain of life was marginalized as an interruption of the wonderful plan that God had for those who would follow Him in faith. In the later years, I found that students were much less inclined to ignore the pain of a fallen world. More of them came from broken homes. Most of them had

grown up on the far side of the Pollyanna political world of a previous generation. They were hardened by personal suffering, scarred by disillusionment with false hope, and skeptical of the easy answers from authority figures that might have satisfied their parents. In the thirty years of my ministry as a pastor I had my own share of pain to add to the story – early childhood experiences of rejection, an autistic son, failures in ministry, a beloved wife with serious depression. My observation, that suffering and spiritual formation are linked, comes from difficult personal experiences as well as years of observing the lives of others. To my surprise, I also found it to be a major and yet forgotten theme in the Scripture.

Suffering and my response to it played a vital and yet neglected role in my spiritual development. It was not so much my ability to empathize with others who suffer that was the point of gain from the pain. Nor was it the strengthening of my character and faith that came from suffering that was in view. Suffering did not only provide an opportunity for witness and a venue through which I could bear more fruit, although this and all of the above benefits were real. Suffering in my life offered the opportunity to empathize with Christ's suffering and experience the intimacy with Christ that such empathy creates. I can illustrate this point from the Hajj, or pilgrimage that devout Muslims make to Mecca. The rationale for this journey is to be found, in part, in the belief that the "prophet" Abraham first made the trip thousands of years earlier. As pilgrims make this trip they identify with Abraham's experience and so find themselves bound to him in spirit. Christians also ritualize much of their relationship with God in water baptism, the Lord's Supper, the worship liturgy, etc. In this book I want to add our personal suffering and pain to that list of ways we can identify or connect with God in Christ.

This is a book about spiritual formation and suffering. It is a book about empathy and intimacy with Christ, the suffering servant. It is a book about "the fellowship of His sufferings" or more accurately, fellowship with God through sharing Christ's suffering. In this introduction I offer a number of reasons for the thesis of this book.

1. 911 – welcome to God's world

The incarnation tells us where God expects to meet us. Pain is the one universal characteristic of life in a fallen world. It transcends time, space, and ethnic identity. Pain is the universal reminder that we live in the shadow of death. 911 is a number that takes on a whole new meaning after the terrorist attack on the Twin Trade Towers in New York City. September 11 has changed our nation in a way more profound than perhaps we will ever realize. The security that we had enjoyed, taken for granted, and assumed unassailable was toppled with the Twin Towers. Some people have asked, "Where was God in all this tragedy?" The question suggests that such a terrible event did not fit in a world where God was alive and working. As Americans, could it be that we have been naïve and disconnected with the rest of the world? Through the events of Sept. 11 we entered a reality that much of the rest of the world has known but we have only observed from afar; a world characterized by acute physical suffering, fear, pain, insecurity, hopelessness, fear, and anger. We are faced today with the possibility and the reality of great suffering on a national and personal level that we had not faced before Sept.11, 2001.

In spite of our dramatic attempts to buffer the pains of life, we must realize that the incarnation sends us a powerful message. The message is that God chooses to meet us in our weakness, pain, and suffering. This is dramatically seen in the way in which Jesus comes into this world. He is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. It is in the valley of the shadow of death that he waits to meet us.

While we want and expect to meet God on the mountaintops of life, the incarnation tells us that He plans more often to meet us in the valleys.

2. Scars will shape our souls.

Suffering and our response to it shape our lives and relationships more than we realize. Adoniram Judson, a missionary to Burma, endured great suffering and for 17 months was tortured for his faith in Ava Prison. The scars on his body were a mark of his shared fellowship with Christ. Undaunted, upon his release he asked for permission to enter another province to resume his ministry. The godless ruler denied his request, saying, “My people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might SAY, but I fear they might be impressed by your SCARS and turn to your religion!” Jesus’ greatest influence on the church was not from his ethical teaching, his moral example, or his charismatic leadership. It was in his suffering and death. As we share his suffering and live out his story as our story we know him and bear witness to him in a powerful way. It is in the fellowship of his suffering that we know him and also display his power. This was the testimony of Adoniram Judson.

Suffering has hidden benefits and should not be feared. Let me be very clear, I do not like pain. I will continue to do all I can to avoid suffering but the fact is, I cannot avoid all pain nor should I expect to do so. I also can no longer deny the powerful role suffering plays in the Biblical story of faith nor can I deny pain’s potential for spiritual formation in the lives of God’s people. We should not glorify pain but neither should we miss the challenges and opportunities it presents to us to enter the fellowship of his suffering.

3. The cup of blessing that we bless involves suffering.

The success of Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion of the Christ” has drawn attention to the suffering of Jesus. The film presents a powerful image of the physical and spiritual torture of Jesus during the last hours of his earthly life. Gibson focuses attention on the single most important aspect of Jesus ministry – his suffering and death. Of all the religious leaders in history, Jesus is unique in that he alone came for the purpose of suffering and dying.

For a moment, consider the most basic expression of worship in the Christian tradition – the Lord’s Supper. *The communion bread and the cup that Christians take in remembrance of Jesus bear witness to the dignity of His suffering and they also invite us to make peace with our own pain and with those who may have caused that pain.* When we take the body and blood of Christ in the form of the bread and wine, we symbolically take his story as our own. We, in essence say, “Our lives are to find identity and meaning as we share the suffering and glory of Christ.” This book is about spiritual growth or as some term it, spiritual formation. The most basic symbol of our faith, the Lord’s Supper, shows us the way to intimacy with God. It is in the sharing of his suffering and the glory that follows.

4. Sharing Christ’s story exposes our humanity.

The greatest challenge of our generation is not in our understanding of technology and what it offers us but it is rather the question, “What does it mean to be human?” Jesus as the “Second Adam” is the prototype of humanity, as God would have it. In other words, we become more authentically human as we become more like Jesus. It is in delighting in God that we realize the “desire of our hearts.” (Ps.37:4) Our wants are too often confused with our deepest desires, to the extent that we use the promise of Psalm 37 to justify what amounts to carnal delights. We reason that if we delight in God, He will grant us a happy marriage, satisfying job, good health, etc. After all are not these the “desire of our heart?” But is this really the true desire of our heart? Is not the deepest desire of every human heart much more

radical? Might the true desire of our heart be nothing less than living true to all that God has called us to be. We want to be fully human and that is realized as we draw near to Christ and allow our story and his to follow similar paths. We are called to be true to ourselves as image bearers of the Creator. We find ourselves, become fully human, and have Christ formed in us as we lose ourselves in sharing Christ's story as our own. This is the essence of spiritual formation – becoming Christ-like or becoming fully human.

Spiritual formation involves what the Apostle John terms, “abiding” in Christ. ***We abide in Christ when our “life story” and His “life story” share common features.*** By necessity this alignment with Christ will involve many exciting experiences, including the power of his Spirit, faith, hope, and love that give us a new sense of identity and significance. It also will involve the fellowship of his suffering because suffering was a part of our Lord's story as he entered and walked through a broken world. It is in sharing his suffering that we have fellowship with him. God does not expect us to simply endure pain but to meet him in the suffering.

If suffering is a part of Jesus' story and our story we must look at suffering in a fresh and positive way – as a discipline in spiritual formation. Personal spiritual formation is often associated with the disciplines of prayer, meditation, service, fasting, etc. While these disciplines can be very important, the suffering of Christ also plays a role, and one that can't be avoided in a fallen world. We have the freedom to choose the other disciplines, but suffering often comes to us independent of our choosing. For this reason we must learn how to respond to it, to profit from it. If Jesus learned obedience by what he suffered (Hebrews 5:8) should we not expect the same as we experience the fellowship of his suffering?

5. Suffering is a special gift.

Suffering is the gift that we never seek and too often fail to appreciate. People seldom consider suffering to be a gift from God in the same way that faith is a gift from God. Paul, however, sees suffering as a gift in Philippians 1:29: “*For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.*” But this is one gift from God that most people have little interest in receiving. Healthy people have a deep aversion to pain and suffering. People go to great lengths to avoid pain. They repress it, medicate it, and deny it. Suffering is the opposite of all that we long for and desire in life. It is the essence of hell. But we find suffering almost impossible to escape and for that reason it is a universal human challenge. Try as we might to avoid or deny the pain of life, we are forced to view its ugly face. Pain scares us, not just because we often can't control it but because we fear that suffering will rob us of life or at least a quality of life that we want. If I lose my mate, I fear there is no way I can be happy. If I have to get around in a wheelchair, I fear that my life would be miserable. We also may fear that pain will cause us to turn from God and become cynical, angry, bitter people. Have we not seen terrible results in people's lives because of pain? Pain can be horrible and produce very negative results. Yet we are perplexed as we read in Scripture “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,*” (James 1:1). Jesus tells his followers in Matt.5, “*Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*”, “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted*”, “*Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely.*” It seems as though God expects us to face suffering with an attitude of anticipation for something positive. How should we or can we face the challenge of suffering so as to profit from it? There are rich opportunities to develop endurance, character, and empathy for others who suffer. But we are called to do more than endure pain. We are called to more than the strengthening of our character through suffering. We are called to more than a powerful

witness to our faith in the midst of hardships. We are called to do more than learn how to minister to others through our trials. We are challenged to actually know God through our suffering. This path to knowing God through suffering must start with putting suffering in its proper place. Suffering is a gift.

6. Empathetic suffering can connect us with Jesus.

Empathy is a path to intimacy. As we reflect upon our own pain, knowing that Jesus has shared it with us, before us and for us, we empathize with him and are drawn to him. We empathize with his suffering and he with ours. One of the great sources of comfort for all who suffer has been the realization that our Lord is empathetic. He shared our flesh and knows the experience of rejection, being misunderstood, physical suffering, and ridicule, and he knows how we are tempted to respond. (Heb.4:15) What we sometimes fail to realize is that we also have the opportunity to empathize with Christ, in that our suffering enables us to understand his suffering. It is this mutual experience of empathy that draws us together. Spiritual formation takes place in the context of this dynamic experience of shared pain, “the fellowship of his suffering.” For too many of us there is a desire to experience intimate fellowship with God while observing Christ from a distance so as to not participate in his suffering. Is this realistic?

Consider one of the most painful situations that you could imagine. When I think of the tragedy of childhood sexual abuse there are no words that can express the shame, guilt, sense of loss, and pain that are attached to the soul that has been thus violated. How can a person who has been sexually abused expect Christ to empathize and how can such a person empathize with Christ? I don't want to pass over this form of suffering too quickly, but let me remind the reader that the incarnation-God becoming flesh was an insult to a holy God of proportions that could only be compared to the violation of soul that we find in severe abuse. Jesus knew what it meant to have the core of his soul violated. His scars were deeper than we will ever realize. Those who have known the horror of sexual abuse have but a hint of the insult of the incarnation to a holy God. What love is this that God would become man and die as a criminal? As we will see later, he bore our shame before we knew anything about shame. We can know that he empathizes as we understand his story. We know his story by sharing his suffering. We can feel his pain in our painful experiences. We find comfort in knowing that he has gone before us in our suffering. Consider the story of Paul's conversion in Acts 9. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?” (vs.9) are words from Jesus in the face of Saul's abuse of the church. Jesus felt the pain of his people so acutely that their pain became his own pain. Do we feel Jesus' pain in the same way? As we enter the fellowship of his suffering we are postured to have his life formed in us because we empathize with his pain.

Those who read this book should expect to come away with fresh and encouraging ways of viewing life, especially those painful parts of life that seem to make no sense. As a result of reading this book, Christians should expect to walk with Jesus in a new and more powerful way because of, and through, personal suffering. This book is not a fluffy, “forget about your troubles and look on the bright side of life” book. It is not a book of stories of how people have overcome hardship and turned lemons into lemonade. It is not a book that tells you how “under-dogs” can become “wonder-dogs.” The book is not about realizing your dreams through the discipline of positive thinking. For those who are looking for what I call Camelot spirituality, this book will be a disappointment. This book will not dodge the pain of life but focus attention on the suffering and encourage us to feel the pain and shame. It will challenge us not just to medicate or avoid pain but to face the confusion and suffering of life so as to profit in it and through it. It bids us come to and walk empathetically with Jesus, the Suffering

Servant. My personal experience with pain has played a big part in shaping my life and the material of this book. The book is not about me however. It is about sharing the life of Christ so as to empathetically know him through the fellowship of his suffering.

7. Managing life is an illusion.

The singularly most important point of the Sermon on the Mount was that we are unable to manage life so as to avoid suffering and pain. “Blessed are those who mourn” is the state of the soul of one who has been touched by the Sermon on the Mount. The law was given to make us more humble than holy. It is in our humility that God meets us. It is our suffering and our mourning that provide an entry point for our communion with God through Jesus.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that the message of this book is only for people who are at the end of their rope, bottom of their pit, or wailing in unmanageable pain. Let’s face it, all of us have a pain problem but most of us feel that we have life under adequate management. A close friend recently struggled with terminal cancer and died after four months of great discomfort. Much attention was given to what medical professionals called “pain management.” We were all so thankful for the technology that enabled our friend to experience some relief from his agony. The ability to manage physical pain is understandably an important part of medical treatment. No one likes to hurt. To the extent that we can control or eliminate suffering, we most certainly will and should.

Emotional, social, and spiritual pain, no less than physical pain cries out for management. It is no secret that I and other people spend a good bit of our energy trying to avoid, explain, or medicate the pain of living in a broken world. Many of us manage emotional and spiritual suffering with painkillers (addictions), positive thinking (faith), and denial, all of which can effectively marginalize our hurts. But when we marginalize pain and suffering, are we living in the full reality of a fallen world that is broken and not apt to be fixed?

For years I conveniently turned my back on my own “soul sorrow” and certainly on the “soul sorrow” of those around me. I felt better when I managed pain by avoiding it or killing it with addiction to work, pleasure, etc., but was I really the better for doing so? I was not. I found that many of my painkillers were, at least, distractions from obedience to my calling as a Christian, and at worst, down right sinful. How many of us are addicted to work, fleshly pleasure, power and control, drugs, relationships, etc. out of a drive to avoid or medicate pain? How many of us are so accustomed to medicating pain in our lives that we are not even aware that we are doing it! How much of our God given energy, designed for worship and service is wasted in pain management? How unwilling have we been to enter the fellowship of his suffering?

John (not his real name) grew up in a home where there was little emotional affirmation from his mother. The pain of loneliness, the sense of emotional isolation, the inadequate modeling in intimate relationships with the opposite sex set John up for an adult life of suffering. John was afraid of women and lacked confidence in relating to them, yet longed for the affirmation that he had not received as a child. He medicated his pain with pornography, which became an addiction and served as a temporary painkiller. His marriage failed, his faith weakened, his self-respect eroded, he turned finally to others for help. In his counseling he realized that the root of much of his struggle was centered in his attempt to manage pain. This kind of pain management is unfortunate at best and is simply adding more pain at worst. Too often our need to medicate our pain sets us up for sinful and self-destructive strategies that can become addictive strongholds. Satan loves to fuel these strongholds with fear of pain. God

would much rather see us enter the fellowship of his suffering with anticipation and hope of abiding intimacy with Jesus.

Our culture teaches us that the “pain and pleasure” scale is the gauge for our well-being. We sometimes feel that God does not love us if we suffer. Yet suffering did not seem to separate the Apostle Paul from a deep sense of God’s love. If Paul’s greatest expression of joy (his letter to the Philippians) came while in prison, maybe we should seek to learn from and in our suffering rather than run from it. The thesis of this book is most simply – *As we empathize with Christ’s suffering through our own, we are intimately bound to him.* It is the alignment of our lives with his life even so as to share the fellowship of his suffering, that contributes to our spiritual formation.

8. Our response to life’s “hard stuff” is the key to living.

Our response to life’s “stuff” separates the blessed from the rest. We all make mistakes. We all are victims of the mistakes and sins of others. What separates the blessed from those that are not is the way each responds to the circumstances of life. We may never be able to control the storms of life but we can build a house on a rock. Our hope comes not so much from the weather as the shelter. It’s not what we face in life but how we face it that determines success or failure. If this is true, then the best way to be of help to others in this present world is to teach them how to live in it or with it not how to avoid or deny its pain.

I might use a simple sports illustration to make my point about the importance of our response to suffering. I recall a Byron Nelson Golf tournament in Dallas in the late 60s. Arnold Palmer hit his drive into the rough behind some trees. He was over 200 yards from the green and appeared to be in deep trouble. I was behind the green and could see his feet under some branches as he hit his second shot. The ball seemed to fly out from under the limbs of the tree, rise into the air and to my amazement land on the green. “On in two.” The difference between a great golfer and a good golfer can be seen in how the great golfer is prepared to recover from a bad shot. All golfers hit bad shots now and then. The great golfers are able to recover when others are not. Is the same principle true in life? Can it be said that the mark of a healthy mature person is seen not only in their ability to stay out of trouble but more typically in their ability to properly respond in the face of disappointment, failure, and suffering? J. Wallace Hamilton in Leadership Magazine made this observation: “People are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success; poverty is more prevalent than wealth; and disappointment more normal than arrival.” Our personal experiences of suffering and failure can offer a most important opportunity to find unexpected growth and joy. But we must be prepared and postured to profit from our pain. But how can we ever recover from those bad shots in life, where we find ourselves in a bunker, out of bounds, or with a lost ball? How can we turn those situations into profitable experiences even gifts whereby we can know Jesus more intimately? This book will help you find opportunity and even blessing in the fellowship of his suffering.

9. Healing is not the only end or purpose of suffering.

Healing is an important part of God’s Kingdom. Where does it fit in this story? I want to underscore the importance of deliverance, healing, and blessing as a part of God’s Kingdom. There are many times when God’s desire is to remove our pain, change our circumstances, save us from our foolishness, and bless us with a taste of the life to come. While respecting the fact that God often will deliver us FROM our pain, I want to focus our attention in this book on how *God can also choose to deliver us IN and THROUGH our suffering.* This book is but one side of the story. This book is written because suffering, as a positive opportunity for spiritual

formation, is often neglected, misunderstood, and unpopular. Let me repeat, I do not want to suggest that we should seek to suffer, neither am I saying that we should not try to remove suffering. A large part of our calling as followers of Christ is ministry to alleviate unjust suffering and promote justice. Much needs to be said in support of compassion ministry and even more in support of the ministry of justice but that is not my purpose in this book. I am saying, we should not be afraid to suffer and we should not demand that all suffering be viewed only in a negative way. We should rather seek to know him through the fellowship of his suffering.

10. Modern Western society has come to view pain as incompatible with human dignity.

It is now judged by many to be “merciful” to assist a person in pain to end his own life. *Human dignity comes to be contingent on being pain free.* Before the present age of anesthetic medicine, pain was a more accepted part of life. People expected to suffer and did so, in many cases, heroically. There is a long-standing connection between physical pain and spiritual gain. In some religious circles pain is viewed less as a problem than a solution. Self-inflicted pain was linked to religious ecstasy and mystical encounter with God, to achieve the highest form of spiritual existence. Today, if someone willingly endures pain that could be medicated or if they inflict pain upon themselves, they are assumed to be mentally and emotionally ill. This modern notion is indeed modern for it ignores a long and rich religious heritage that has been shared by Christians and non-Christians alike. We have lost our capacity to understand why and how pain would be valuable to mystics, members of religious communities, and perhaps humanity as a whole. The role of pain before it was displaced, was rich, and ultimately situated persons within broader social and religious contexts.

I am not denying that there can be mystical religious profit from pain. Nor am I suggesting that we should refrain from the use of anesthetics. I am more focused on the intellectual and emotional empathy that creates a deep spiritual community where Christ is at its center. This is a community marked by the sharing of his suffering.