

A Hard Look at Hard Times

It is not fair.

Joanne was a rebel in her teen years. She lived for the moment and for the pleasures of this life. By contrast, her sister, Mary lived a life of discipline, attending Bible College preparing for a life of serving God and others. Years past, both women were now in their late 30s. Joanne was happily married to a wealthy broker, with three healthy, beautiful children. God had dealt her a merciful hand in spite of her past foolishness. Mary's story was quite different. She married a fellow student at her college. In spite of his profession of faith, he proved to be an abusive husband and father. The marriage ended in a bitter divorce with two children confused, vulnerable, and insecure. As these children entered the teen years there were problems with sex, drugs, and crime. Mary came for counseling, depressed, confused, and bitter. "It is not fair . . . My folks told me that if I lived a good clean life, that God would bless me. I did the best I could and look at what I have . . . My sister did whatever she wanted and look what she has. I feel like I have been abused by God or a fool for following him." She could not deny her faith but she was not a happy camper in the Kingdom. Is her story unique? For a long time I refused to believe that experiences like Mary's were real. Like so many, I kept "cooking the books" of life to make them say what I felt was "spiritually correct." These experiences may not be the norm but they are real.

Is it fair? No! Can a loving God allow this? He too often does. Can this possibly be used for good? Yes, just as the life and death of Jesus was used for good, and just as the rejection of the Apostle Paul by the early church was used for good, and just as the persecution of Joseph by his brothers was used for good, and just as Paul could "suffer the loss of all things" was used for good, and just as David's rejection by the Philistine commander (I Samuel 29) could be used for good, the rescue of his family (I Samuel 30).

As I have struggled with these hard issues, there are a number of things that have become clearer. First, *pain and suffering in life challenge our understanding of God as a loving and powerful Father*. More specifically, the real challenge to our sense of fairness is not the presence of suffering and evil but rather the presence of **apparently unjustified suffering and evil**. We can make peace with the suffering of surgery to remove a life threatening tumor, or the loss of a job because of poor performance, or the discipline of a child for telling a lie. These examples of pain seem justified and understandable. It is those examples of suffering that seem to have no possible justification that present the real challenge. The innocent child that suffers and dies because of an abusive home, the poor family that is displaced by a devastating storm, the person who experiences chemical depression all of their adult life, the innocent victims of a terrorist attack, etc. One must be impressed by the fact that the Biblical record contains many such examples of suffering. Consider the death of the male children in Bethlehem by Herod in Matthew 2. An angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt to spare baby Jesus. Why could not the angel have warned the other parents of Herod's evil

actions? What did the death of those children teach anyone? How did the families of those children feel? Were they expected to be excited about baby Jesus coming?

We can ask the question: If God is all-powerful and perfectly loving why does he not prevent what appears to be unjustified suffering in the lives of His children? We are comforted in being reminded that our question is not an irrational one. It was anticipated by the Apostle Paul in Romans 9 verse 19 where he asks the question, “Why does he (God) still find fault for who resists His will?” Paul goes on to remind us that the answer is beyond our grasp. It is one of the great mysteries that exists in a time-bound cosmos created by a timeless God.

The book of Job teaches us that we cannot expect to understand all of the suffering that we experience. Job suffered greatly but never was allowed to understand why. We, the readers of his story, were told why it all happened. The reason Job suffered was never to be revealed to him. His responsibility was to respond with faith, not to know why. In the end Job did not say, “I now understand”, he said, “I repent.” Job is a part of the “wisdom literature” of the Bible because his story addresses this most perplexing puzzle of life, the mystery of suffering. If Job’s story tells us anything, it tells us that there are reasons for suffering that we may never know and cannot even imagine. How are we to understand the suffering of Paul as he is trying to do missionary work in the face of storms, wild beasts, unloving believers, etc.? Could not God have done something to help out? The power that is displayed in Paul’s life story is bound up in his hope and joy that are completely out of context with his circumstances. What did he know that we do not?

Ask the right question.

My second observation is that *we must concentrate not on answering the question, “Why did this happen?” or “What does this mean?” but rather, “How am I to respond?”* There is value in knowing why we got into this mess only if the information will help us know how to respond. We are not responsible to understand or justify events so much as respond to them with wisdom.

We must start by looking at the horror of suffering in a new way. Our attitude toward failure and suffering determines our emotional altitude after failure and suffering. What happens to us is not so significant as what happens within us as a result. Processing the pain correctly is vital to profiting from the pain. This can be illustrated in the trauma of childbirth. I have been told that there are few experiences more painful for a woman yet this pain is eagerly accepted because of the context and expected result. Do we look at other examples of suffering in our lives in the same expectant way? I believe we can, and for good reason. Jesus tells his disciples to “abide” during times of trouble. He does not say, “You must figure this out.”

Suffering has many faces.

Third, *suffering comes in many forms*. I do not claim to be the poster boy for pain. I have not suffered so much that only a few of my most heroic readers can identify with my experience. My life is not outside the broad norm where most of us live. If I offer any insight to the subject of suffering, it is not because I have suffered well or dramatically but because I have and am discovering in my pain some blessings that I did not expect. I still struggle for answers to why this or that has happened to me and why those around me are asked to bear so much. In spite of the fact that I do not have answers to many of these questions, I nonetheless have found great comfort in knowing that I can experience spiritual formation or growth through pain without having to understand why others and I suffer.

It is not difficult to see that pain comes in a number of different forms and in a number of different arenas of life. Physical pain can be devastating and paralyzing. For two years I suffered with chronic back pain. It hurt only when I sat, walked, stood, or moved from a prone position. I found that the pain at times consumed my life. It was life changing. It forced me to adjust everything around the pain. But emotional, social rejection, isolation, shame, and injustice can be even worse. The loss of dignity, respect, and love that comes with emotional and social isolation takes away one of our favorite coping mechanism, for pain, the company and respect of others, and in so doing it is perhaps worse than physical suffering. There are three areas where I and most of my acquaintances have felt emotional pain. I am not including in this list, self-inflicted suffering which can be a sign of emotional illness, a part of religious discipline, or an act of self sacrifice for another's welfare. For our present purposes we will think only of the various kinds of involuntary suffering that cannot easily be avoided.

We have suffered, for example, because of personal obedience in following the dictates of our faith. I have known what it is to work long, hard hours at below minimum wages out of obedience to my calling and to all the while be treated as a servant. I have experienced discrimination in seeking housing because of my faith. I have forfeited opportunities for wealth and recognition to follow my convictions. Don't get me wrong. I am not complaining or bragging, but just indicating that there is usually some kind of price to be paid in following deeply held convictions. The small price I have been asked to pay is nothing compared to the suffering of so many who have given even their lives for the cause of Christ.

I have also felt the pain and the consequences of disobedience. I experienced what is a pastor's worst nightmare. I resigned a successful ministry because of misconduct. I lied to protect myself and betrayed people who trusted me. I eventually made a public confession of my sin to the people that I loved and went through a two-year period of supervised restoration to ministry. While few of us are asked to experience public shame for our sins it is not uncommon for us to pay a price for our disobedience in other ways. We can suffer because of obedience and disobedience.

And I have shared the common suffering that is a part of life but not related to anything I have done, good or bad. Growing up in a house without central heating, running water or

electricity in the plains of South Dakota was difficult. By today's standards we were poor although I never thought of our family in that way. Spartan physical living circumstances were not nearly as painful as experiences of abuse I endured at the hands of an unstable teacher during the first two years of my public education in a one-room schoolhouse. I can still remember going to school crying and coming home crying for weeks on end because of the fear I had of my teacher. After 50 years, I can still see the words on the pages of the reader that I could not understand and yet was asked to figure out on my own, knowing that in ten minutes I would be openly humiliated in front of the school when asked to recite. I can remember being locked out of the school by the teacher during a snowstorm because she did not want me interrupting the noontime play of the older children. It was not the weather outside so much as the cold social temperature inside that hurt.

I am the parent of a child afflicted with severe autism, requiring a level of care and commitment that has demanded extreme family sacrifice. For the first 20 years of my marriage, my wife suffered from serious depression that deeply affected the quality of our relationship. I am sharing this not because I want sympathy or praise but because I want my readers to know what I mean by different kinds of suffering. I want them to know that I have tasted some, but not all, the hardship that life can deliver. I have friends that have suffered far more than I have. As I look at my circumstances, I have a lot of thankfulness in my heart. Loving parents and family, mental and physical health, success in vocational endeavors, close friendships, etc., are all a part of my experience.

Three kinds of suffering.

Incarnational suffering	Suffering for obedience	Suffering for disobedience
The result of living in a fallen world	The result of living a holy life in an unholy world	The result of living an unholy life in a world with consequences

The point is, we all suffer to some extent. The question is not who has endured the most but rather who has learned from their suffering and what have they learned.

Pruning

Fourth, ***God uses all things.*** The fact that God “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom.8:28) is a promise that has given hope to many in times of trial. The comfort comes from the realization that God can use whatever happens to us for our good and His glory. Jesus’ parable of the vine in John 15 should be understood in this same light. The parable speaks of the vinedresser’s pruning of the vine so that it would bear more fruit. When we translate this parable into our real life circumstances, we ask if God is orchestrating each painful circumstance for our increased fruitfulness? Rather than orchestrating each instance of pain and suffering, God is probably using the hard times that fall on each without discrimination

to equip us for a more fruitful existence. We don't have to figure out where or why this or that has happened to us. We need rather to expect that God can use it no matter what its origin. The challenge is directed to our response not our analysis of the cause.

Our suffering is consistent with the Biblical story.

Fifth, the Biblical record is full of stories of suffering. *Anyone who reads the Biblical stories can not escape the fact that suffering is a universal theme.* Pain and suffering persisted even for the Godly. The prophets, apostles and Jesus all knew of life's emotional, physical, and spiritual pain. The Biblical narratives are however, filled with hope. The happiness and peace experienced by great people of faith in the Bible seemed to transcend life's suffering. When Paul wrote a letter of joy from prison, it was not his circumstance that lifted his spirit. King David's psalms of praise did not come from a charmed life with a perfect family and brilliant career.

This simple fact cannot be avoided - God does not anoint circumstances for people but people for circumstances. God certainly could choose to orchestrate life's circumstances to please the desires of his followers, but He does not always choose to do so. Adam felt isolation in the garden. Noah experienced alienation from his community in building the ark and then endured a great flood. Abraham's family was full of conflict; Moses' failures before and after the Exodus are notorious. David's broken relationships are painful reminders that even a great king suffers. The prophets experienced more rejection than acceptance, and Paul's imprisonment occupied a good part of his Christian experience. Most Sunday school students remember Peter's failures. We could go on and on. I am hard pressed to think of many Biblical characters who lived the kind of charmed life we often expect of ourselves. Who can read the Psalms and not feel the pain of the writers as they wrestle with the confusion and disappointment of living in a fallen world? Suffering was such a common experience for the early church that the letter of I Peter was written specifically to encourage believers through life's enigmas. But without a doubt, the greatest example of suffering is seen in the "suffering servant" Jesus. And while it is true that he bore our greatest suffering for us by making atonement for our sins, he also invites us to meet him at the cross, pick up our own, and bear it that we might know him.

In some pretty important ways, the Christian gospel is steeped in the subject of suffering and offers unique insights into the challenge of pain. For reasons that are not hard to understand, we can look past the many Biblical examples of suffering, failure, and pain because we do not want to think of them as a part of God's path for us. But how could we forget that the cross and resurrection of Christ are all about suffering and hope in the face of great disappointment.

Suffering brings an opportunity.

Sixth, *recognize the various forms of suffering as an opportunity for many good things to happen.* When Peter wrote to the early church words of encouragement to those who were slaves and being treated unjustly he offered what seems to us to have been strange advice. He

says, “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men; whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him*” (I Peter 2:13). Later he addresses slaves with these words, “*Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.*” (I Peter 2:18-19). The key to understanding this strange exhortation must be found in the last phrase, “*because he is conscious of God*”. In other words, because of an awareness of God who will one day make things right, and a knowledge of his Son who willingly suffered and refused to insist on justice for himself, we are to enter suffering as those outside the faith cannot. We face suffering with a broader picture, eternity and a clearer model, Jesus.

The call to suffer unjustly is inspired by the example of Jesus who “*entrusted himself to Him who judges justly*” (I Peter. 2:23). We are identified with the Kingdom when we follow Jesus’ lead and demonstrate a hope that goes beyond our space and time. We follow Christ when we are willing to relinquish personal rights and demonstrate that our hope is beyond our power to demand and manipulate our world to “work right.”

There are certain attributes of God that can only be demonstrated in the face of unjust suffering. Our gracious response is most powerful when we are treated without mercy. Our courage has meaning when we are faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle and yet keep “doing the right thing.” Hope is a most powerful testimony when we are in a hopeless situation. Love is meaningful when it is expressed in the face of not being loved. Suffering offers to us powerful opportunities not only to grow, and know Jesus, but also to bear witness that we are citizens of a different kingdom. This is perhaps why we find so many examples of suffering in the Biblical narrative. God’s people are to demonstrate their relationship with and consciousness of God in the context of unjust suffering.

Suffering offers to us a unique opportunity to experience the power of God and live a life of great significance because it is a life that parallels that of Jesus. The lessons that we can learn from our pain are not limited to how we are humbled before God, or how we are equipped to empathize with others, or how we can learn patience and discipline. There is much more at stake in our suffering. It is an intimate knowledge of Jesus that awaits those who will share his story; a story that is one of suffering, hope, and love. This leads to our next observation.

Suffering as a point of connecting with Jesus and His people.

Seventh, ***expect to meet Jesus in your suffering.*** Helen Keller noted, “I rejoice in my disabilities because in them I have come to know myself, my calling, and God.” The Apostle Paul writes about an intimate relationship between Jesus and those who are adopted as sons (and daughters). The intimacy of this relationship is captured in the 15th verse of Romans 8 where “*we cry out ‘Abba Father’*” This intimate expression is the result of the Spirit’s ministry “*bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God*” (vs.16). But in the

next verse, which is often overlooked or misunderstood, Paul says, “*if we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*” Could it be that the “Abba Father” intimacy is tied to the sharing of his suffering? Peter puts it in a slightly different way when he writes in I Peter 4 saying, “*but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory, you may rejoice with exultation*” (vs.13). Entering into an intimate knowledge of Christ’s glory is possible but apparently only as we share his suffering. Because the suffering brings us close to God it inspires us to “do what is right” (vs.19). John the apostle, in the fifteenth chapter of his gospel addresses suffering and pain. He indicates two sources of pain. In verse 1-17 the pain comes from the pruning hook of a loving Father, in verses 18-27 it comes from the persecution of a hateful world. In both cases, however there is this theme of an “abiding” intimacy with Jesus. Again, we ask, could the intimacy be, in some way, connected to the experience of suffering?

When Jesus chose twelve disciples that they might be with him, he expected that they would know him by walking where he walked, sharing his joys and sorrows, learning to see life as he saw it. When Paul spoke of knowing Jesus, he recognized that he would do so by walking with him, in part through the fellowship of his suffering, along with his death and the power of his resurrection. Paul understood that the virtues of faith, hope, and love would grow out of the integration of the word of the cross and resurrection into his life.

The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 offers insight into the nature of the “spiritual connectedness” that forms genuine community. The older brother in the parable thinks of his relationship with the Father and the family as that of a slave. He is laboring to be holy with the expectation that it will endear him to the Father and the family. What it does produce is bitterness, loneliness, and pride. The Prodigal, on the other hand, finds a connected intimate relationship through his brokenness, suffering, and repentance. The Father meets him in his humility and repentance. Is it not also true that we connect with each other more often in our failures and pain than in our successful efforts at managing life? The intimacy of Christian community is found not through our disciplined successes but in our brokenness, shame, and humiliation. We connect most deeply at the point of grace applied to the most vulnerable part of our soul. We find the strength of community in our weakness.

Over medicating pain is a temptation.

Eighth, *resist the pressure to kill all the pain and thus sacrifice a full experience of life in a broken world.*

Julius Caesar said, "It is easier to find men who will volunteer to die, than to find those who are willing to endure pain with patience." The impulse to kill the pain is great and we have a vast array of tools at our disposal just for that purpose. Early in my own life I found the pain and confusion of social rejection by a school teacher to be so great that I was willing to shut down the “feeling” side of life altogether in a desperate attempt to manage the pain. I was willing to suffer the loss of even positive feelings like joy to avoid the negative feelings of rejection. My emotional life was affectively shut down. I was seldom depressed but also

seldom elated. I was emotionally dead, flat-lined. When this kind of extreme measure is taken in our strategy to manage pain, we run the risk of checking out of a meaningful interaction with life altogether.

Larry Crabb describes three levels of longings in his book “Inside Out.” Casual longings are the superficial wants like the desire for a new home, more money, a nice vacation, etc. At a deeper level (Critical longings) we seek intimate and satisfying relationships, vocational experiences that use our strengths, and a sense of significance in what we are doing with our lives. Crabb suggests that there is a third level that represents the core of life itself (Crucial longings) where our very soul is in the balance. It is at this level of being reconciled to God and thus to our calling and purpose that we find the deepest experience of peace and joy. Each of these levels has its trauma and pain. The deeper the un-met longing, the greater the pain. When we experience pain at the “casual level” we medicate it by 1) changing the circumstances that produced the pain or 2) draw strength from the next deeper level. Let’s say I am not able to get tickets to a ball game or performance that I really want to see. I am hurt, frustrated, and even angry. What do I do? Well, I can find a way to get the tickets through special connections or by paying more for them than I would have had to ordinarily. The second way in which I can cope with this “casual pain” is by relaxing and realizing that I have a loving wife and family that I can spend the evening with. I am respected at my work, am healthy, and have lots of freedom to do other things that are enjoyable to me. My resources at “the critical level” charge my soul’s battery so that I can cope with “casual pain.” But what happens when I experience pain at “the critical level” of my life? Let’s say my marriage is full of stress, I am not respected at my work, a child is troubled and alienated from me or any one of a number of other things that could bring serious suffering at a deep level. Again, the suffering can be relieved by a change in circumstances like restored relationships, a change at work, or a reconciled relationship with a child. Or it can be managed by finding a resource in the deepest level of my soul “the crucial level.” This is the level where my soul finds its rest in God, where I am at peace with the world and myself in a way that can not be easily touched by circumstances of this life, even great loss. But what happens when I do not have strength at that deep crucial level of my soul? I am very vulnerable and may find myself resorting to desperate measures to manage the pain if I do not have the deep security and sense of significance and serenity that comes from a soul that is healed and healthy. If I cannot change the circumstances that are responsible for my pain and if I do not have deeper reserves to cope with the suffering, I will be tempted to deny the pain in some way – perhaps by shutting down my feelings, period. I also may be tempted to medicate the pain by compensating with self-serving postures like outbursts of anger, or indulgence in artificial pain killers like food, or addictive, self-abusive patterns of conduct.

When Jesus came offering his followers abundant life he was not offering them a free ticket to satisfy all their casual longings or even their critical longings. He was offering them a resource in himself that would enable the disciples to cope with the pain and suffering of a broken world without checking out of a vibrant life experience. It would be a deep peace that

the world could not give or take away. It would be a sense of security, serenity, and significance that would charge the battery of the human soul so that even in the deepest of valleys there would be a sustaining energy that would quietly assure the human spirit that all is well. This assurance would empower a person to persevere, abide, remain, and even overcome. It would prevent the person from emotionally closing shop as a defensive strategy in the desperate attempt to manage pain. Now, all of this is fine and good in theory, but in real life it is seldom easy to cope with the pain of suffering at the critical levels of life. We may be tested to the limits of our endurance but the path is clear as to how we are to respond and where we are to find strength.

God does not want us to check out of life by repressing feeling to avoid pain. Nor does he want us to find our hope in circumstances that we may not be able to control. He wants us to experience the kind of intimate relationship with Him that will empower our souls to meet the challenges of a fallen world as we look to the hope of the fullness of the Kingdom at Christ's return. It is this intimate relationship that is the goal of spiritual formation. It is our willingness to meet God in the midst of our pain and find a fellowship with Him there.

“For He will give His angels charge concerning you”?

Ninth, *Many of God's promises of deliverance must be examined in light of God's greater purposes.* Psalm 91 is one of those treasured expressions of unflinching trust in the God who will not let “any evil befall you” (vs.10), “for He will give His angels charge concerning you” (vs.11), “for you have made the Lord your refuge”(vs.9). What are we to make of these words? It sounds too good to be true, for indeed, it does not seem to fit our experience. Life is full of trouble for those who trust God and for those who do not. God's people do not seem to have a “get out of jail free” card in their hands.

There are four possible responses to this Psalm and others like it. First, we can look at this Scripture in a logical, straightforward way and conclude that its promise is false or even worse, its “god” does not exist. The emphasis of this response is placed on **“logic from the data.”** The critic of the Christian hope scoffs and says, “This is an example of how ‘out of touch’ Christians are with reality. They actually purport to believe that a personal God exists who will come to their rescue every time they are in trouble. The very fact that such ‘promised’ deliverance does not take place is proof enough that this ‘god’ does not exist.” Christians are not impressed with this critique but why are they not? If they believe that God exists, how do they explain the apparent suffering of His people?

The second response to this Psalm is to observe that the key to realizing the blessings of God's protection is tied to “faith”. In this response the emphasis is placed on **“our responsibility.”** If we really trust God, nothing bad will befall us. The problem is not with the promise of God or with His character, but with our faith. We do not have a strong enough faith. When we exercise the faith, God will provide the promised benefits. But there are some hard realities that make such a conclusion difficult to accept. Are we to suggest that everyone

who has trouble in life is a person void of strong faith? How about David, the Apostle Paul, and even Jesus? When we tie the blessings of God's temporal protection with our spirituality, we encourage a denial of suffering motivated by a need to be seen as spiritually healthy. I may choose to live in denial of the pain for the sake of maintaining a posture of faith. Such denial leads to lots of other difficulties. For example, when we deny pain and suffering, we also refuse to be open to the critique of others. We also run the risk of eventually becoming disappointed if not bitter with God. While it is true that trust in God is an important part of experiencing security, it does not follow that faith will assure us that our lives will be free from suffering, pain, and disappointment.

The third response is the most common. It places the emphasis on "*blind hope.*" It simply refuses to face the difficulty by trying to cling to the promise in some sentimental way, while deep down inside wondering how it can be true given the considerable experience and observations to the contrary. We want it to be true so much that we will simply close our minds to contrary evidence. But our gut knows that there is a disconnect here. As one young girl put it in her response to the question, "What is religious faith?" "It is believing something you know is not true." Sadly, this is all too often a working definition for many people. They have deep doubts and questions that are never asked because of fear that the answers do not exist or will be scarier than the enigma itself. Thoughtful Christians should not be afraid to ask the hard questions.

There is a fourth response that is preferable to the first three. It sees Psalm 91 as a poetic expression of the character of God and the fearfulness of life in a fallen world. What is in view here is not physical or temporal comfort but rather the issue of the ultimate source of insecurity and fear, which is death or separation from God. The Psalm talks about the "recompense of the wicked" (vs.8), and the "salvation" of the righteous (vs.16). Certainly the Psalm writers did not experience the kind of blessed life that a literal rendering of this Psalm would suggest. Look for a moment at David. His life was full of trouble, heartache, and disappointment. His children suffered greatly, he was shamed as an adulterer and murderer. He was not alone; the Apostles suffered and warned others that they should expect suffering. Even Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Certainly God had not forsaken Jesus in an eternal sense, yet in a temporal sense Jesus felt and seemed to be abandoned to great suffering. We understand Jesus' suffering as vindicated by a *higher purpose.*

When we observe how this Psalm is used in the New Testament we have further reason to direct its application beyond the immediate circumstances of this life. In Hebrews chapter 1, verse 14 there is an allusion to this Psalm. Speaking of angels, the writer says, "*Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?*" The concern in this passage seems to be eternal life not temporal comfort. In Jesus' temptation before Satan in Matthew 4, Satan quotes this Psalm in his temptation of Jesus. Satan invites Jesus to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple and prove the truthfulness of Psalm 91. If this Psalm is true, Jesus should certainly experience deliverance.

Jesus responds with “On the other hand, it is written, *‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’*” Jesus does not see this Psalm as a promise that is always to be applied to his suffering in the present. He rather sees a bigger purpose at work in his suffering. This is most important. What is God’s purpose? Is there something bigger than my temporal comfort at stake in my troubles? What is God doing in these painful circumstances that I am asked to face? Is there a unique opportunity to know and show His glory through the sharing of His suffering?

Question a negative attitude toward suffering.

Tenth, *repenting of our negative attitude toward suffering and pain may be needed.* Knowing Jesus involves being in touch with his shameful suffering by coming to feel the shame of our own soul. Knowing the power of his resurrection can not be separated from sharing his death, which also involves the fellowship of his suffering. It is this shared story that is the doorway to a life of service and self-giving love.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians chapter 3 verse 10 writes, “*that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*” The text suggests that there are three things related to knowing Christ. First, the experiencing of the power of his resurrection. That is to say, by experiencing the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the radical grace of the New Covenant, and the hope of eternal life, we come to know Jesus. Second, the sharing in his sufferings leads to knowledge of Jesus. The suffering that comes from his incarnation, human obedience, and his bearing the shame of our disobedience provides an opportunity to know Jesus. It is significant that it is His “sufferings” plural that are highlighted. It is not just the cross but his life, which involved much suffering that is in view. Third, being conformed to his death will lead us to know him. We know him by laying aside our selfish defenses and sinful impulses, including our self-made dreams, protective strategies, and stubborn will to be our own god. It is the second way we know Jesus, through the fellowship of his sufferings, that is our concern in this book.

We will find no real or lasting peace if we embrace a fanciful view of life that ignores the harsh realities of a world full of senseless suffering, confusion, injustice, and seemingly impossible circumstances. We must declare war on such a Camelot view of life and encourage each other to move toward the painful and confusing areas of experience without fear. Rather than running from our pain and suffering we should expect to come to know God and ourselves as we move toward our pain and in it bear the cross so as to have fellowship with Jesus and be at harmony with our core humanity. I believe Paul was right: suffering is a gift.

In some ways, the message of this book is a call to repentance. We must deal with our tendency to refuse to walk in the Spirit of the New Covenant, to refuse to learn from suffering, and to refuse to die to self. We want to know him in his resurrection power and we know that we should come to know him through the cross but how about the sharing of his

sufferings? Is suffering a part of our expectation and resolve? I fear that for many of us pain is not seen as a part of the plan. We hope to know him without walking with him in his suffering. We must change our attitude and posture toward suffering and pain from one of fear and denial to expectation and hope. We must realize that fellowship with Jesus is a matter of sharing in his life story. It is through empathizing with Jesus' suffering that we are bound to him in a way that compels us to love him and follow him. It is a matter of having our life story reflect his life. Spiritual formation starts with repentance. Jesus' life story and ours is the subject of the next chapter.

I want to challenge the reader to pause and deal with his or her basic attitudes toward suffering and pain. It is not wrong to want to avoid and or remove suffering. No healthy person likes pain and suffering. But we cannot fully escape suffering in this life no matter how much faith or positive thinking we may possess. We will continue to fight against suffering and pain. It is natural and proper to do so but let us not be terrorized by it or ignore its unique opportunities for spiritual formation. Let us take up our cross and follow Jesus, not fearing the hard times but expecting to learn through them and specifically come to a closer relationship with Christ through them as we empathize with his suffering. The remainder of this book will not be helpful until we accept the basic premise that our personal suffering can provide an opportunity for spiritual formation. Correcting any misplaced attitudes toward suffering will be vital to an appreciation of the following chapters.