



BE STILL, *Embracing God's Purpose & Provision in Suffering* MY SOUL

*25 Classic & Contemporary
Readings on the
Problem of Pain*

Edited By
NANCY GUTHRIE

Be Still, My Soul: Embracing God's Purpose and Provision in Suffering

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Preface

A while ago, a Bradford pear tree in our backyard cracked and split and had to be removed. Seeking to shield our neighbors from the horror of seeing into the inside of our messy garage, we had three evergreen trees planted in its place. But one of them just wouldn't take root and repeatedly fell over. We would prop it up, pressing in the dirt around it, only to find it had blown down again a short time later when a swift wind blew.

Honestly, I had about given up on getting the evergreen to take root and thrive when my parents came to visit. As we pulled into the driveway, we saw that the tree had fallen down again. Even before going into the house, my dad found an old broom handle in the garage and some rope. He plunged the rod deep into the ground by the tree and tethered the tree to it with the rope. From that time on, no matter how hard the wind blew, the tree didn't fall down. Today, it is still standing tall.

Few of us get through life without having the winds of difficulty blow through our lives at some point—cold and unrelenting winds that threaten to knock us down for good. And when the winds of suffering blow in our lives, what we need most is something secure to tether ourselves to, something strong and unmovable that will keep us from being swept away in a storm of questions, fear, discouragement, and disillusionment.

The writer to the Hebrews describes just what we need, just what God has provided to us. “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two

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unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul . . . ” (Heb. 6:17–19).

An “anchor of the soul.” That’s what we want and need—to have something solid and secure to hold on to so we can live our lives at rest rather than being blown to and fro by every new circumstance that threatens us. The writer to the Hebrews tells us to “hold fast to the hope set before us.” In other words, he is telling us to tether ourselves securely to what God has said, to the promises of God. And we know that “all the promises of God find their Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus himself is God’s grand “yes!” to us, the hope set before us to hold on to.

It was when my husband, David, and I had a daughter we named Hope that we were forced, in a sense, to discover what it means to “hold fast to the hope set before us.” I’m not sure I even understood what “hope” really meant when we gave her that name. I just liked the sound and simplicity of it. But in the days following her birth, when we discovered that due to a rare metabolic disorder her life would be very short and very difficult, when the situation in human terms seemed hopeless, I began my search for understanding what hope really means, and what it means to hold fast to it.

During Hope’s life and following her death, and then again when we had a second child who had the same fatal syndrome as Hope had, David and I reached out to grab hold of the promises of God in the person of Jesus Christ like never before. Suffering does that. It pushes us deeper into the mystery of God. It makes us more desperate for him, to hear from him and sense his presence. We found the solid rock of Scripture was our sure foundation, reshaping our understanding and expectations of God, instilling us with confidence in the character and purposes of God.

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Holding on to hope, for us, has not been a vague, sentimental experience. It has been an ongoing choice to believe God's Word. We have sought to understand and embrace God's perspective on suffering and bring him glory through it (John 9:3). We've grabbed hold of his promise that there is purpose and meaning in our suffering because we are his (Rom. 8:28). We've grabbed hold of the sovereignty of God, believing that he "meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). We have rested in his presence and provision of joy and strength and faith and perseverance—everything we've needed (2 Cor. 12:9). We have found that in the darkest of times, he has been with us, comforting us (Ps. 23: 4). We "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly" (Rom. 8:23) for that day when God's promises of resurrection and restoration become reality.

Occasionally someone has said to me, "You must be a very strong person."

But I know the truth—that *I am not strong*.

However, I am tethered to Someone who is strong.

I am not holding on to hope in terms of a positive perspective about the future or an innate sense of optimism, but rather holding on to the living person of Jesus Christ. I am grabbing hold of the promises of God, his purposes, and his provision, and refusing to let go.

I suppose that is why collecting this great writing on God's perspective, purpose, and provision in suffering has been such a great joy to me. The scriptural truths elucidated in this book by respected classic and contemporary theologians and Bible teachers are the truths that have been the solid foundation under my feet in the storms of suffering and sorrow in my life.

I pray they will provide that for you as well—that they will shape your thinking, steel your resolve, and still your soul.

Nancy Guthrie

The Gift of Pain

PHILIP YANCEY

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. . . . For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

Romans 8:18, 22

I have never read a poem extolling the virtues of pain, nor seen a statue erected in its honor, nor heard a hymn dedicated to it. Pain is usually defined as “unpleasantness.” Christians don’t really know how to interpret pain. If you pinned them against the wall, or in the dark, secret moment, many Christians would probably concede that pain was God’s mistake. God really should have worked harder and invented a better way of alerting us to the world’s dangers. I am convinced that pain gets a lot of bad press. Perhaps we *should* see statues, hymns, and poems to pain. Up close, under a microscope, the pain network is seen in an entirely different dimension.

In our embarrassment over the problem of pain, we seem to have forgotten a central fact which was repeatedly brought to my attention by Dr. Paul Brand, a missionary surgeon who headed the rehabilitation branch of America’s only leprosarium. “If I had one

gift which I could give to people with leprosy, it would be the gift of pain," Dr. Brand said.

Pain itself, the hurt of pain, is a gift. After years of working with leprosy patients Dr. Brand learned to exult in the sensation of cutting a finger, turning an ankle, stepping into a too-hot bath. "Thank God for pain!" he says.

Doctors once believed the disease of leprosy caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and the gradual loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand's research, it has been established that in ninety-nine percent of the cases, leprosy only *numbs* the extremities. The decay of flesh occurs solely because the warning system of pain is absent.

How does the decay happen? Visitors to rural villages in Africa and Asia have sometimes observed a horrible sight: a person with leprosy standing by the heavy iron cooking pot watching the potatoes. As they are done, without flinching he thrusts his arm deep into the scalding water and recovers the cooked potatoes. Dr. Brand found that abusive acts such as this were the chief cause of body deterioration. The potato-watching leprosy victim had felt no pain, but his skin blistered, his cells were destroyed and laid open to infection. Leprosy had not destroyed the tissue; it had merely removed the warning sensors that alerted him to danger.

On one occasion, as Dr. Brand was still formulating this radical theory, he tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield to his pressure on the key. A leprosy patient, an undersized, malnourished ten-year-old, approached him, smiling.

"Let me try, sahib doctor," he offered and reached for the key. He closed his thumb and forefinger on the key and with a quick jerk of the hand turned it in the lock. Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? His eyes caught a tell-tale clue. Was that a drop of blood on the floor?

Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had slashed the finger open to the bone; skin and fat and joint were all exposed. Yet the boy was completely unaware of it! To him, the sensation of cutting a finger to the bone was no different than picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

The daily routines of life ground away at these patients' hands and feet, but without a warning system to alert them, they succumbed. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, they would adjust and walk crookedly. If a rat chewed off a finger in the night, they would not discover it until the next morning. (In fact, Brand required his departing patients to take a cat home with them to prevent this common occurrence.)

His discovery revolutionized medicine's approach to leprosy. And it starkly illustrates why Paul Brand can say with utter sincerity, "Thank God for pain!" By definition, pain is unpleasant, so unpleasant as to *force* us to withdraw our finger from boiling water, lightning-fast. Yet it is that very quality which saves us from destruction. Unless the warning signal demands response, we might not heed it.

Just as physical pain is an early warning system to the brain, it is a warning system to the soul.

Brand's discovery in the physical realm closely parallels the moral argument for pain offered by C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*. Just as physical pain is an early warning system to the brain, it is a warning system to the soul. Pain is a megaphone of God which, sometimes murmuring, sometimes shouting, reminds us that some-

thing is wrong. It is a “rumor of transcendence” which convinces us the entire human condition is out of whack. We on earth are a rebel fortress, and every sting and every ache remind us.

We could (some people do) believe that the purpose of life here is to be comfortable. Enjoy yourself, build a nice home, engorge good food, have sex, live the good life. That's all there is. But the presence of suffering complicates that philosophy. It's much harder to believe that the world is here for my hedonistic fulfillment when a billion of its people go to bed starving each night. It's much harder to believe that the purpose of life is to feel good when I see people smashed on the freeway. If I try to escape the idea and merely enjoy life, suffering is there, haunting me, reminding me of how hollow life would be if this world were all I'd ever know.

Something is wrong with a life of wars and violence and insults. We need help. He who wants to be satisfied with this world, who wants to think the only reason for living is to enjoy a good life, must do so with cotton in his ears; the megaphone of pain is a loud one.

Pain, God's megaphone, can drive me away from faith. I can hate God for allowing such misery. Or, on the other hand, it can drive me to God. I can believe the promise that this world is not all there is, and take the chance that God is making a perfect place for those who follow him on pain-wracked earth.

There are two contributions to the problem of pain that hold true in any circumstance, whether healing or death ensues. The first is the simple fact of Jesus' coming. When God entered humanity, he saw and felt for himself what this world is like. Jesus took on the same kind of body you and I have. His nerve fibers were not bionic—they screamed with pain when they were misused. And above all, Jesus was surely misused. This fact of history can have a large effect on the fear and helpless despair of sufferers.

The scene of Christ's death, with the sharp spikes and the

wrenching thud as the cross was dropped in the ground, has been told so often that we, who shrink from a news story on the death of a race horse or of baby seals, do not flinch at its retelling. It was a bloody death, an execution quite unlike the quick, sterile ones we know today: gas chambers, electric chairs, hangings. This one stretched on for hours in front of a jeering crowd.

Jesus' death is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, the most important fact of his coming. You can't follow Jesus without confronting his death; the Gospels bulge with its details. He laid out a trail of hints and bold predictions about it throughout his ministry, predictions that were only understood after the thing had been done, when to the disciples the dream looked shattered. His life seemed prematurely wasted. His triumphant words from the night before surely must have cruelly haunted his followers as they watched him groan and twitch on the cross.

What possible contribution to the problem of pain could come from a religion based on an event like the crucifixion? Simply, we are not abandoned. Because Jesus came and took a place beside us, God fully understands. Dorothy Sayers says:

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.¹

By taking it on himself, Jesus in a sense dignified pain. Of all the

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING

kinds of lives he could have lived, he chose a suffering one. Because of Jesus, I can never say about a person, "He must be suffering because of some sin he committed." Jesus, who did not sin, also felt pain. And I cannot say, "Suffering and death must mean God has forsaken us; he's left us alone to self-destruct." Because even though Jesus died, his death became the great victory of history, pulling man and God together. God made a supreme good out of that day. T. S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

That uniquely Christian contribution is a memory. But there is another one—a hope. To the person with unrequited suffering, it is the most important contribution of all. Christ did not stay on the cross. After three days in a dark tomb, he was seen alive again. Alive! Could it be? His disciples couldn't believe it at first. But he came to them, letting them feel his new body. Christ brought us the possibility of an afterlife without pain and suffering. All our hurts are temporary.

By taking it on himself,
Jesus in a sense dignified pain.

In seventy years we can develop a host of ideas about how indifferent God appears to be about suffering. But is it reasonable to judge God and his plan for the universe by the swatch of time we

spend on earth? Have we missed the perspective of the timelessness of the universe?

Who would complain if God allowed one hour of suffering in an entire lifetime of comfort? Yet we bitterly complain about a lifetime that includes suffering when that lifetime is a mere hour of eternity.

In the Christian scheme of things, this world and the time spent here are not all there is. Earth is a proving ground; a dot in eternity—but a very important dot, for Jesus said our destiny depends on our obedience here. Next time you want to cry out to God in anguished despair, blaming him for a miserable world, remember: less than one-millionth of the evidence has been presented, and that is being worked out under a rebel flag.

God is not deaf. God is as grieved by the world's trauma as you are. His only son died here. But God has promised to set things right.

Let history finish. Let the orchestra scratch out its last mournful warm-up note of discord before it bursts into the symphony. As Paul said, "In my opinion whatever we may have to go through now is less than nothing compared with the magnificent future God has planned for us. The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. . . .

"It is plain to anyone with eyes to see that at the present time all created life groans in a sort of universal travail. And it is plain, too, that we who have a foretaste of the Spirit are in a state of painful tension, while we wait for that redemption of our bodies which will mean that at last we have realized our full sonship in Him" (Rom. 8:18, 19, 22, 23, PHILLIPS).

As we look back on the speck of eternity that was the history of this planet, we will be impressed not by its importance, but by its smallness. From the viewpoint of the Andromeda Galaxy, the holo-

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caustic destruction of our entire solar system would be barely visible, a match flaring faintly in the distance, then imploding in permanent darkness. Yet for this burnt-out match, God sacrificed himself. Pain can be seen, as Berkouwer puts it, as the great “not yet” of eternity. It reminds us of where we are, and creates in us a thirst for where we will someday be.

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Philip Yancey is a prolific author and editor-at-large for *Christianity Today* magazine.

When life becomes difficult—when we face deep disappointment, agonizing loss, or on-going pain—we set out on a search to find answers to significant questions: Why would God allow this to happen? What good could come out of this? What will it look like to trust him?

In this collection of insightful essays and excerpts, classic and contemporary theologians and Bible teachers—ranging from John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Tim Keller, John Piper, and D. A. Carson—explore Scripture in regard to the causes and purposes of suffering, as well as what it means to trust God in the midst of hardship and pain.

NANCY GUTHRIE explores the issue of suffering as one who has suffered the loss of two of her children. She is the editor of *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* and *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross*, and has authored six books, including *Holding On to Hope* and *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*.

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