

GOD'S PURPOSES
IN OUR PAIN — * —

KEITH R. KRELL



10 WAYS GOD USES SUFFERING FOR OUR GOOD — *

KENNETH BERDING AND

“*God’s Purposes in Our Pain* is a striking and unique book. Berding and Krell explore the ‘so that’ passages in 2 Corinthians that reveal many of God’s actual purposes in our suffering. This is a fruitful and enlightening study, and I am happy to recommend it.”

Randy Alcorn, Founder and Director, Eternal Perspective Ministries; author, *Heaven and If God Is Good*

“As someone who has walked through years of chronic pain and disability, I found *God’s Purposes in Our Pain* to be both refreshingly honest and hopeful. This book doesn’t minimize suffering but instead looks to Paul’s most personal epistle (2 Corinthians) to show how the sovereign God of the universe is working in infinitely more ways in and through our suffering than we can see in any moment. Berding and Krell remind us that suffering is never wasted and that God will use it to deepen our trust in him, display his glory, and help us comfort others in their pain. Whether you’re suffering now or will one day (and all of us will), may your heart be encouraged as you read these gospel-soaked words.”

Dave Furman, Chancellor, Gulf Theological Seminary; author, *Being There* and *Embracing God in Your Suffering*

“*God’s Purposes in our Pain* points suffering believers to the glorious truths and promises of the gospel as revealed in God’s good word. I commend this resource to you as you walk the path of suffering with great hope in our crucified, risen, reigning, and one-day-returning Savior.”

Jon Nielson, Founding Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Wheaton, Illinois

“*Why is God letting me suffer?* This insightful book offers biblical, compassionate answers straight from Scripture to that age-old question. Though suffering remains a mystery beyond our full comprehension, God is always at work in and through our pain. If you’re wrestling with why pain has landed unbidden on your doorstep, this book is a must-read. The principles laid out here have shaped my life, and I pray they’ll encourage you as you seek to understand God’s purposes in your own pain.”

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, author, *Watching for the Morning*

“What a necessary and hope-inducing corrective: A biblical response to suffering does not merely seek the causes (e.g., the fallen creation, sinful creatures) but actively seeks the purposes—more trust, less pride, ministry to others, and displaying Jesus, to name a few. Berding and Krell shepherd us to look through the lenses of Scripture to see God and his good intentions working in and through our suffering and pain. I cannot recommend this book enough! And I say this not from an ivory tower of biblical theories but as my wife prepares for death in hospice care after four grueling years of ALS. She cannot move, speak, or even embrace our three children. The loss and lament are overwhelming. Yet as Berding and Krell show from Scripture, ‘Suffering always has a purpose.’ God’s goodness covers our grief like a blanket on a cold night, and in ways not yet fully known, God is forming us through my wife’s disease to trust him, rest in his provision, embrace our weakness, suffer with others, and yearn for the glories of the new creation.”

Edward W. Klink III, Senior Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Roscoe, IL; author, *The Local Church*; *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament); and *The Beginning and End of All Things*

“Kenneth Berding and Keith Krell treat the age-old problem of suffering with both freshness and faithfulness. They examine Paul’s teachings on suffering in 2 Corinthians and demonstrate how God has many ways of using suffering for our good. *God’s Purposes in Our Pain* is thoughtfully organized, crisply written, biblically careful, and pastorally helpful.”

Christopher W. Morgan, Dean and Professor of Theology, School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University; Lead Pastor, Immanuel Baptist Church, Highland, California

“*God’s Purposes in Our Pain* is a rare and deeply needed book—biblically grounded, pastorally sensitive, and unmistakably Spirit-filled. In a world aching with unanswered questions and silent suffering, Kenneth Berding and Keith Krell offer not trite solutions but ten powerful, Scripture-soaked truths drawn from Paul’s most personal letter. With wisdom born of personal trials and seasoned ministry, they guide readers gently but firmly toward hope—not by minimizing pain but by magnifying God’s purposes in it. This is not just a book to read; it’s a companion to walk with through the valleys. I commend it with gratitude and prayer that it will comfort many and strengthen more.”

Mike Ansari, Founder and President, Heart4Iran

“In *God’s Purposes in Our Pain*, Berding and Krell grapple with a most necessary question: Why does God allow Christians to experience pain and suffering? With exegetical fidelity and pastoral sensitivity, the authors take us on an important journey to better understand one of life’s perplexing mysteries. May we learn and find healing through these ten lessons on Paul’s theology of weakness and suffering—and participation and ultimate redemption in Christ, to the glory of God.”

Matthew D. Kim, George W. Truett Endowed Chair in Preaching and Evangelism, Truett Seminary, Baylor University; author, *Preaching to People in Pain*

“Pain! It’s something we all experience while living on a cursed planet among sinful people. Pain is everywhere! And it hurts—all the time. You’d think we would develop a plan to handle it. Well, this book is a field manual for profiting from pain. Listen carefully. ‘Even if the process feels painful in the moment, in the end we will come to know it as a lavish and extravagant mercy from a loving and merciful God.’ So concludes one section. This book is a map filled with scriptural navigation tips for traveling down a very rough road. Travel well, reader.”

Stu and Linda Weber, authors; speakers

“Most people ask ‘Why?’ during or after some experience of pain. What they often mean is ‘Who or what caused my pain?’ And God often emerges as primarily responsible. After all, God is God. *God’s Purposes in Our Pain* explores the same question but from a different angle. When Berding and Krell ask ‘Why?’ they mean ‘What is the purpose of suffering?’ It is the right question, of course, and for one simple reason: It points us forward, showing us how to live for God in our pain, rather than backward, blaming God for our pain. In short, it draws us into the story of redemption. Berding and Krell do a magnificent job of mining 2 Corinthians to provide a road map for finding purpose in the pain that God allows. The book is informative, to be sure—the authors are both scholars—but the book is also accessible, encouraging, and empowering, which reflects their pastoral callings too. Finally, the book is profoundly human. Berding and Krell tell stories of real people, including stories about themselves. This book informed me, filled me with hope, and inspired me to seek after God.”

Gerald L. Sittser, Professor of Theology Emeritus, Whitworth University; author, *A Grace Disguised* and *Water from a Deep Well*

“This book radiates profound authenticity, in part because of the genuine faith and enduring hope with which both authors and their families have walked through seasons of deep pain. Now we are blessed with a careful and practical exposition of one of my favorite New Testament books. The truths of 2 Corinthians sustained me through some of my darkest days in ministry. I am confident they will draw you closer to the Savior and strengthen your trust as you read this excellent exposition.”

Daniel Henderson, President, Strategic Renewal; Global Director, the 6:4 Fellowship

“Written by pastor-scholars, this book will be a satisfying meal for hungry souls—those who ask, ‘Why am I suffering? What good can come from my suffering? How can I not lose my hope and joy when the world caves in?’ Berding and Krell answer those cries of the soul with solid biblical teaching from 2 Corinthians, and when we have some answers to the question of ‘why,’ we can bear almost any ‘how.’ Eat and be nourished.”

Jeffrey Arthurs, Chair, Pastoral Ministries Department, Dallas Theological Seminary

“In the school of life, adversity is not an elective but a required course. How we respond to suffering will either make us bitter or better. *God’s Purposes in Our Pain* provides a practical and biblically based approach to cultivating an eternal perspective, choosing gratitude, growing through repentance, learning the power of humility, and receiving the grace of other-centered support.”

Kenneth Boa, Founder, Reflections Ministries; author, *Shaped by Suffering*

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Kenneth Berding and
Keith R. Krell

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*Trudi, I dedicate this book to you. You have traveled the world
with me and lovingly shared my losses, pains, and disappointments.
Through it all, you have remained constant in your commitment
and generous with your joy. I'm so thankful for you!*

KEN

*Lori, thank you for being my best friend and companion. You have walked
with me through times of great suffering, excelling as a wife, mother,
ministry partner, and woman of God. Your love, loyalty, and unwavering
faith, especially in hardship, inspire me daily. I am deeply grateful for you.*

KEITH

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Introduction

What Does *Why* Mean?

THIS BOOK ISN'T a philosophical treatment on suffering. And it won't answer every question you have about the topic. But it will give you a clear *biblical* answer to the problem of *why* Christians suffer. And we think a book like this is really needed.

Why does God allow his children to suffer?

Ken stumbled across a wonderful discovery while writing a book on Paul's thorn in the flesh a few years ago. He noticed that in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul repeatedly combines discussions about suffering with God's purposes for suffering. Most often, Paul uses a particular Greek word to highlight God's purposes, a word that Bible translators normally translate as "so that" or "in order that"—that is, Paul repeatedly and insistently announces in 2 Corinthians that God allows suffering "so that." In this deep and emotional letter, where he writes about suffering more than any of his other letters, Paul frequently explains that God permits a particular suffering "so that."

But as far as we know, nobody has gathered these purpose statements together to address why God allows us, his precious children, to undergo suffering of various kinds.

In this book, we look deeply at ten of the clearest instances where Paul grammatically marks God's purposes for suffering. This approach seeks to provide possible answers to the question of why Christians suffer by carefully grounding it in Scripture, specifically in God's revelation in 2 Corinthians.

So what does *why* mean?

Ken speaks a foreign language that makes it a lot easier to answer this question. That language uses two question words in place of our one English word *why*. Each of the two words, though, is nuanced differently from the other. One looks backward: "From what cause?" The other looks forward: "To what end?"

English can make this discussion confusing by combining both ideas into a single word. As a result, many of us unknowingly struggle even to know exactly what question we're asking when we ask *why* God allows suffering.

This book focuses on the second kind of why: "To what end?" What are God's future-looking purposes in permitting his people to suffer? We've decided to focus on this kind of why because that's what the Bible focuses on.

In fact, when it comes to suffering—Christian and non-Christian—the Bible rarely explains the originating cause of a particular suffering. Except for laying out explanations for suffering in general (e.g., Adam and Eve broke the world when they sinned) or the frequent examples of suffering as a consequence of sin (e.g., Israel's rebellion against God as recorded in the Prophets), the Bible rarely looks backward to explain the *whys* of suffering, particularly the suffering that Christians, his spiritual children, face. But the Bible

does commonly highlight forward-looking reasons why God allows suffering. No book of the Bible does this more clearly than 2 Corinthians.

Following Paul's lead in 2 Corinthians, we do not focus on the *sources* of a particular suffering, which involve such factors as God's sovereign permission, a real and evil devil, a world twisted by sin, and sinful choices that carry consequences. There are some good books that deal with these topics.¹ Rather, we focus on what the ancients called the *telos* of suffering, its end or goal—that is, God's forward-looking purposes for allowing suffering, in your life or someone's close to you.

Second Corinthians is sort of the book of Job of the New Testament. But unlike Job, 2 Corinthians offers actual answers to the question of why God permits his children to suffer. Although this deep and emotional letter of Paul includes purposes that God commonly intends in allowing Christians to suffer, these reasons are not comprehensive. Not even close. But *if* God's holy word lays out some of God's forward-looking purposes in suffering, then why do we start almost every explanation with, "I don't know why God is allowing this," and then act as if there is no more to be said? Perhaps a better response is "I don't know whether these are the specific purposes God has for your suffering, but here is a list of common purposes God intends when he allows his people to suffer." Time spent with such biblically stated purposes will help

1 See D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Baker, 1990); John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway, 2006); Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah, 2014); Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (Penguin, 2015); Kenneth Boa and Jenny M. Abel, *Shaped by Suffering: How Temporary Hardships Prepare Us for Our Eternal Home* (InterVarsity Press, 2020); Tim Challies, *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God* (Zondervan Reflective, 2022).

grow our confidence that God has good purposes for our personal suffering as well since his purposes are likely to include some or perhaps all the items on this list.

Again, we will not dwell on suffering in general. This is a book written for Christians by Christians. Its message is anchored in a biblical book that was originally written by a Christian apostle for struggling Christians.

Second Corinthians is the most autobiographical of all Paul's letters. We learn more about Paul personally from this letter than from any of his other letters. This means that an extra bonus from reading 2 Corinthians is getting to know better the heart of the apostle to the Gentiles since Paul regularly uses his own sufferings to flesh out what he wants his readers to learn about suffering.

Ten Reasons Out of a Thousand

So why does God allow his children to suffer? What are God's forward-looking purposes in allowing his children to struggle, grieve, and experience pain of various kinds?

Christians usually search for *one* positive outcome connected to *one* particular instance of suffering to account for why God allowed it. Even after a period of suffering, it is not uncommon to hear Christians latch onto a single reason as an explanation, such as, "My child came back to the Lord" or "I was protected from making a big mistake."

But looking for a single explanation for a particular instance of suffering is misguided because God's purposes are manifold and multifaceted. God is so great and his purposes so vast that for us to reduce the experience of a heart-wrenching event to a single explanation—even two or three—risks dishonoring God's greatness.

God has a *thousand* reasons for allowing us to suffer! We often use the number *one thousand* to describe this, even though we know that there could be many more reasons, because it is not only a large number but also a number we can sort of wrap our minds around.

Just think about the extent of all God's possible purposes:

- for you in the present
- for you in the future
- for the people around you—your family, your friends, your unbelieving neighbors
- for your church
- for your unborn children or grandchildren
- for something that God wants to shift in world history
- for the battle that is being waged in the heavenly realm between angels and demons that you cannot see
- for something related to God's preparations for the new heavens and new earth
- for God's glory in myriad ways that you cannot see

All these—and so many more!—are possible, even likely, purposes for any suffering you or someone close to you might face. God may show you only one—or maybe two or three—if he decides to show you any at all. And if he does, in most cases, it will come after the fact rather than while you are suffering.

It would be hard to exaggerate how helpful it has been to us to remember that God has a thousand purposes for permitting suffering. This keeps us from grasping for simplistic explanations that don't honor the vastness of our glorious Lord.

But it's one thing to say that we don't know God's purposes comprehensively; it's quite another to say that we don't know

anything about the *kinds of things* that God does through our suffering. On the contrary, there are *general* purposes for which God allows his children to suffer. God has revealed some of these to us in his word and, most particularly, in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We don't have to know that a given purpose is directly tied to a given experience of suffering to receive spiritual help from these general purposes. These are the *types* of things that God commonly purposes when he allows his children to suffer.

In this book, we draw out ten explicitly stated reasons why God allows his people, his precious children, to suffer—all drawn from 2 Corinthians. Because of the kinds of purposes stated in this letter and the pattern that emerges in their sequence, we believe that these should be viewed as *common* purposes for why God might allow his children to suffer.² If we can lean into these purposes—knowing that God is probably purposing some of these as he permits our current sufferings—we will gain strength and confidence to trust God even during our darkest days.

- 2 James O'Brien offers some reasons why we should not limit these purposes to Paul and his apostolic band. See comments in "Lessons on Suffering from 2 Corinthians," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 (1997): 74–75. Matt O'Reilly (largely) agrees, using social identity theory to argue that Paul's description of his suffering helps him to be viewed as "one of us"—that is, one of the group—while still permitting Paul some aspects of uniqueness in his sufferings as the Corinthians' spiritual leader. "Paul, Apostle of Pain: 'One of Us-Ness' and the Question of Suffering in 2 Corinthians," *Journal of Early Christian History* 12, no. 1 (2022): 81–91. See also Sean F. Winter, "Suffering, Salvation, and Solidarity in 2 Corinthians 1:3–11," in *Suffering in Paul: Perspectives and Implications*, ed. Siu Fung Wu (Pickwick, 2019), 74–75. Dwight Poggemiller agrees: "Even though God seems hidden at times in respect to the reasons for specific times of trial and suffering which come into our lives, His general purpose for these trials can clearly be seen. Paul clearly reveals several of these guiding purposes for suffering in the life of the believer in 2 Corinthians." Dwight Poggemiller, "God's Purpose for Suffering in the Lives of His Saints: Theology in Light of Paul's Teaching in 2 Corinthians," paper presented at the annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Lanham, MD, April 3, 1992, 20–21.

As we start our journey into this important and profound topic, let us pray for you:

Gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your precious children who are reading right now. We know that they are probably facing personal suffering—or are close to someone who is—or else they wouldn't have picked up this book. We hurt with the thought that our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering. We grieve with them and long for your abundant grace to be obvious to them as they experience such pain or loss. We believe that the words that follow could profoundly help them, so we ask you, in the name of Jesus, to do a deep work of grace as they read. Reform their hearts, renew their perspectives, refresh their souls, and reinvigorate their faith. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Be Prepared to Strengthen Others Who Suffer

2 Corinthians 1:3–5

AS WE ARE WRITING TODAY, Keith is dealing with painful canker sores lining his throat, on top of recently having minor surgery to remove a distressing growth from his triceps. Ken, meanwhile, is currently recovering from an emergency root canal on one tooth, followed a few days later by a complicated extraction of a separate broken tooth. Ken is icing his face and Keith his arm every thirty minutes. (Oh, and Keith isn't allowed to shower for forty-eight hours—too much information, perhaps?) We laugh between moans as we wonder what it will be like when we get old!

Compared to some people's sufferings, ours are trivial, we know. But even at this level of pain, why does God allow suffering for his children?

The great theologian Westley from *The Princess Bride* once commented, “Life is pain, Highness! Anyone who says differently is selling something!”¹

Everyone without exception suffers. Granted, some people’s suffering is so relentless and intense that it appears categorically different from the run-of-the-mill suffering most people face. But since this book is for all Christians who suffer—whether it is physical pain, relational loss, or straight-up persecution—we are confident that all Christians can benefit from the rich instruction from God’s word that we explore here.

Perhaps you’ve lost a loved one and you’re still grieving that loss. Or you are struggling with a chronic disease that fills every day with excruciating pain. Perhaps you’ve lost your job, and the stress is overwhelming. Maybe you and your spouse can’t have children, and you wrestle with recurrent longings that never seem to go away. Maybe you’ve watched your child rebel, and the emotional toll keeps you awake at night. Perhaps you feel hostility in the workplace owing to your Christian faith. Each one of these situations seems devastating and appears intolerable. So if you or someone close to you is enduring any of these trials, you likely have found yourself asking, “What possible good can come out of this suffering?”

Important and helpful answers to this fundamental question are found in 2 Corinthians, Paul’s most personal and vulnerable letter. In this multilayered epistle, we come to know the apostle’s own weakness, humility, and, yes, suffering. Since suffering eventually affects us all, we can learn so much about God-honoring suffering from one of history’s greatest examples of Christian suffering.

1 *The Princess Bride*, written by William Goldman, directed by Rob Reiner, 1987.

Ministry Preparation Through Suffering

Paul wastes no time getting to his point in 2 Corinthians. After two short verses of greeting (1:1–2), he launches into the first of God’s purposes for suffering in his epistle:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (1:3–5)

Notice the words “so that.” Paul boldly claims that God comforts us when we face affliction “so that” we will be prepared to comfort others who face various kinds of affliction. Observe that Paul doesn’t say, “who comforts us *if* we happen to run into affliction.” Rather, he assumes that suffering will be a feature of every Christian’s experience. And one common purpose that God intends when he allows us, his children, to endure suffering is that it prepares us to comfort others when they face various kinds of suffering.

Amy Carmichael (1867–1951) was a missionary to India who suffered in multiple ways. On the topic of prayer, she commented on the unique ministry that someone who has suffered can have in caring and praying for another who is similarly suffering:

I have noticed that when one who has not suffered draws near to one in pain, there is rarely much power to help. . . . What if every stroke of pain, or hour of weariness or loneliness, or

any other trial of flesh or spirit, could carry us a pulse beat nearer some other life, some life for which the ministry of prayer is needed; would it not be worthwhile to suffer? Ten thousand times yes. And surely it must be so, for the further we are drawn into the fellowship of Calvary with our dear Lord, the tenderer we are toward others . . . God never wastes His children's pain.²

Amy Carmichael might as well have been commenting on the first chapter of 2 Corinthians. Not only do we learn there that God has comforted us in our suffering so that we might comfort others, but we also discover that “as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor. 1:5). Our Lord Jesus went before us in suffering. Following his example, we allow God's comfort to overflow through us into the lives of others.

Not All Suffering Is the Same

What does Paul mean when he writes that God comforts us “in all our affliction” and “in any affliction” (2 Cor. 1:4)? Does he have in mind different kinds of suffering?

Yes, Paul has a variety of sufferings in mind, not just persecution for being a Christian. This connects his writings about suffering with us, in all our various sufferings. Paul includes several lists of trials in 2 Corinthians—far more than anywhere else in his writings (e.g., 6:4–10; 11:23–32). This helps us to see that when he says, “in any affliction” at the beginning of this letter, he isn't thinking of only one type of suffering; he has in his mind different kinds of

2 Amy Carmichael, *Rose from Brier* (1933; repr., CLC Publications, 2015), 127–28.

suffering.³ Here are some categories of suffering that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians:

- outward persecution for being a Christian, including beatings, imprisonments, and social shaming (6:5, 8; 11:24–25)
- general suffering as he fulfills his mission, such as sleepless nights, hunger, shipwrecks, frequent journeys, dangerous rivers, and robbers (11:25–26)
- relational problems with other Christians, such as grieving over the sins of people in the churches he started (2:4; 7:9–10; 11:28–29)
- bodily ailments (4:16; 11:23; 12:7; cf. Gal. 4:12–14)
- opposition from false teachers (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11)
- financial hardship (8:1–5, 9–15)
- satanic opposition (2:11; 11:3, 14; cf. 1 Thess. 2:18)
- loneliness (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6; cf. 1 Thess. 3:1)
- despair, fear, anguish of heart (2 Cor. 1:8; 2:4; 7:5)

God cares for us “in *any* affliction,” which is why this letter has such contemporary relevance. God comforts us “in *all* our affliction,” as 2 Corinthians 1:3–5 teaches, to prepare us to comfort others in their affliction.

Comfort as Spiritual Strengthening

But what does the word *comfort* mean?

When we think of *comfort*, we usually think of things like coffee, biscuits and gravy, a hot shower, soft sweatpants, and slippers—all while watching a game or cooking show. Comfort, at least in most

³ For a longer list of sufferings in 2 Corinthians, see Kenneth Berding, *Paul's Thorn in the Flesh: New Clues for an Old Problem* (Lexham, 2023), 114–16.

of our minds, is anything that soothes our pain and relieves our distress. But is this what Paul had in mind when he used the word *comfort*?

The Greek word translated “comfort” in these verses means more than merely soothing us when things are hard. It means “to help by giving encouragement” or even “to instill someone with courage or cheer.”⁴ In this passage, the emphasis is on God spiritually strengthening us during our sufferings *so that* we will be able to spiritually strengthen those who suffer. So instead of comfort making us comfortable, Paul emphasizes that God’s comfort makes us spiritually strong.

And how does God strengthen us? He may use a verse of Scripture, a sermon, a book, a chorus or hymn, or a sense of the peace that passes all understanding. He may intervene by meeting physical or material needs. He may use nature: a sunset or sunrise, a scenic mountain, an ocean, or a lake. Most frequently, he comforts us through other believers.

But one of the problems with suffering is that it can seem pointless. It *feels* as if it accomplishes nothing. If we think that it serves a purpose, then suffering is more bearable. Even the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) grudgingly acknowledged, “He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.”⁵

That’s why the stated purposes for suffering in 2 Corinthians are so powerful. The first of many reasons is that we receive divine help in order to help others. We are comforted to comfort, strengthened

4 Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), under “παρακαλέω.”

5 This quote by Nietzsche was cited multiple times and made popular by psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, rev. ed. (Washington Square/Pocket Books, 1985) (emphasis in original).

to strengthen, encouraged to encourage, exhorted to exhort. This is how God works. God receives the sacrifice of Jesus's suffering and invites us to share, in a small way, in suffering with him. Then he uses our sufferings to help others who suffer.

Yet our pain can often keep us from accepting that God intends good purposes through our suffering, even though the Bible makes clear that God prepares us through our sufferings to give spiritual help and strength to others.

Suffering Isn't Just About Us

Part of our difficulty in putting this first purpose into practice—at least for many of us—is that we are incorrigibly individualistic and not just in our thinking about suffering. We, at least subconsciously, think, “I read my Bible for my sake. I pray for my sake. It's good enough to watch church online since church is essentially *for me*.”

But the Christian life is lived in community, as James Thompson so aptly articulates: “The Christian faith offers not an immunity from suffering, but a community of suffering and of divine comfort.”⁶ So instead of asking, “Why am I suffering?” it might be better to ask, “How can I use my suffering?”

Don't waste your suffering. Be strengthened *through* it to strengthen others.

In one of the churches we ministered in, there was a group of women who modeled this marvelously. Every Sunday, these five or six older women—all widows—sat in a row together near the front of the room. We remember the way these women enfolded a recently widowed woman into their group, inviting her to sit in

6 James W. Thompson, *Preaching Second Corinthians*, Proclamation: Preaching the New Testament (Cascade, 2021), 12.

church with them and join them for lunch afterward. This lovely group of women had been particularly equipped to minister to a grieving sister in the Lord because they themselves have walked the path of loss and grief.

Maybe in place of focusing on the fact that you were hurt or are hurting—and we acknowledge that your hurt may be utterly distressing—perhaps you might consider looking out for people with similar sufferings and sharing with them the comfort and encouragement you have received from the Lord.

You don't have to wait until you feel totally "healed" from your own pain to do this either. Some of your own healing can come through the ministry of encouragement toward others. But if you are going to genuinely help people who are suffering, be sure to do it wisely. That means that you need to listen carefully. Acknowledge their pain. Let them express their emotion. Offer appropriate physical touch. Express your confidence that the Lord truly cares for them.

Also, don't say, "I know what you're going through." (At least, to some degree, everyone's grief is unique.) Don't act like the person who has all the answers. Avoid mouthing predictable platitudes, clichés, or trite expressions, such as "Time heals all wounds," "The Lord knows best," or "God doesn't make mistakes." And avoid sharing similar incidents or accidents you have experienced, even if God has used them to prepare you to help those who are hurting. But do seek to connect at a heart level with those who are suffering, and do all you can to build them up.

Your worst suffering may be your best opportunity to serve others.

Keith recently had the privilege of meeting an extraordinary pastor named Troy Keaton. When Troy was seventeen years old,

he married his high school sweetheart, Janel. Shortly after they celebrated thirty-four years of marriage, Janel tragically passed away after a long battle with cancer. Troy was left as a fifty-two-year-old widower, with four adult children, pastoring a large church. When Keith talked to Troy, he asked him a lot of personal questions. Keith left that conversation humbled and inspired by the godly character and conviction of this pastor. But Keith's most important takeaway was when Troy said, "I want to display Jesus in all that I do. And now that I no longer have my bride, I want to give the rest of my life to the bride of Christ." Troy knows that the strengthening he received from God has equipped him to minister to others.

Many people know the story of Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983). Imprisoned in the notorious Ravensbrück concentration camp during World War II for harboring Jews, she and her beloved sister Betsie suffered greatly for their "crime." Betsie died in vile Ravensbrück, only twelve days before Corrie was unexpectedly and inexplicably released. Corrie would later speak to thousands about the Lord's mercy that she had received during her incarceration and would encourage others to forgive.

But what many people do not know is that after the war, Corrie helped establish a rehabilitation center for concentration camp survivors in the Netherlands, permitting jobless and humiliated former Nazi collaborators to live in her large family home. She even helped found a rehabilitation center at a former concentration camp. Corrie frequently communicated that all her sufferings during the war had prepared her to give spiritual help to others after the war.⁷

7 Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill (Revell, 1971), 209–16, 234–37; Corrie ten Boom, *Tiump for the Lord*, with Jamie Buckingham (Revell, 1974), 29–30, 45–51.

Our all-knowing and all-wise God may intend a thousand purposes for our suffering, many of which he is unlikely to reveal to us. But God's word declares that one of his common purposes for permitting suffering—and for spiritually strengthening us in our own suffering—is to prepare us to compassionately minister his comfort and encouragement to others.

Reflection Questions

1. Second Corinthians includes a variety of sufferings that Paul and his coworkers faced. In what ways are you suffering today (e.g., physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, relationally, financially)?
2. In what ways have you experienced the “mercies” of God (2 Cor. 1:3)? How has God provided comfort, encouragement, and strength in your afflictions?
3. Paul “blesses” God for how God has comforted him in his afflictions (1:3–4). How frequently do you give thanks to God for your suffering? What would it take to do so more often?
4. What are some ways that you have brought comfort and spiritual help to others who are suffering (1:4)? How might you do so in the future? How does bringing comfort to those who are suffering help you see God's providence in your trials?