

EMBODIED HOPE



A THEOLOGICAL MEDITATION
ON PAIN AND SUFFERING

STUDY GUIDE



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Dear Reader,

This study guide is intended as a companion to *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*. We recommend you complete each section of the study guide after you have read the corresponding chapter.

We encourage you to work through this study guide with others, whether that's a friend or two, your small group, or your church. You certainly can use this study guide as an individual, but our hope is that this study guide will promote thoughtful conversations.

Here is what you can expect:

- ▶ *Discussion questions.* These questions are drawn from the reading, building off of the ideas in each chapter.
- ▶ *Quotes.* Quotations from the book are sprinkled throughout each section as a reminder of some of the main points from the chapter.
- ▶ *Outside voices.* Approaching the topic of the chapter from a slightly different angle, these are intended to open up conversation. We may include questions or leave them for you to discuss as you'd like.
- ▶ *Prayer.* Each study includes a brief prayer about the chapter—feel free to build on it!
- ▶ *Final reflections.* These are intended to wrap up your thoughts about the chapter and provide space to sketch, write, or maybe just think. This we encourage you to do as an individual. You may share your reflections with others only if you feel led.

You will find an outline for each chapter provided at the back of this study guide.

We hope this study guide will help you dig deeper into the insights of the book and find practical ways to implement them in your walk with Christ.

We encourage you to write in this study guide, whether you are reading this book as a church, small group, or as an individual. Give yourself a chance to slow down, think, and maybe do a little journaling.

God bless.¹

PART I

THE STRUGGLE

Chapter 1: Hard Thoughts About God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Simone Weil (8-9) emphasizes that our experience of suffering is holistic. The condition of our bodies influences how we understand God and his ways. How have you seen this to be true in your own life?

Our struggle is not ultimately with a single side of suffering but with how it affects us in our totality: from our relationships to our faith, from our bodies to our hope, from our mourning to our love.

Have there been times when someone you know was experiencing hidden suffering that affected their relationship with you? What was your response?

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

Zephaniah 3:17 ESV

John Owen describes our tendency to have “hard thoughts” about God. How is this type of thinking different from honest questioning arising from the struggle of suffering? Why is this thinking so damaging?

How has physical suffering affected your relationship with God and others?

How does Zephaniah 3:17 portray God's attitude toward us? How do the words of this prophet move us to reconsider what we think God is like?

When experiences of physical suffering persist, it is all too common to find ourselves plagued by distorted perceptions of God, making him appear tyrannical or even demonic.

How do we distinguish between “hard thoughts” (10) and honest questions? Are there honest questions you need to ask God?

How did you respond to the story of Taylor and his father (12)? Why do you think it can be hard to embrace the idea of God's tender, loving presence with us in suffering?

If you have Jesus of Nazareth as your starting point for understanding God's presence in your pain, how does your view of pain change? How are your previous wrong conceptions of Jesus rewritten?

Our journey is to learn why such hard thoughts don't reflect the triune God. Our hope is to learn to hear him singing over us, to trust his presence in the middle of the pain.

What are some ways that you can come alongside those who you know who struggle to enter into fellowship and worship as part of the church body because of their hidden suffering?

To understand God and his relationship to our pain, we will need to examine the case of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who walked the dusty roads of Galilee over two thousand years ago. Only by listening to his words and by following the movement of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension might our very human struggle be seen in different light.

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Isaiah 62:5

How do you respond to the biblical imagery of God singing over us and delighting in us? Why is that your response? Do you struggle with the idea of “shallow sentimentality” when it comes to this image? Why or why not?

PRAYER

Father, we know that you are good. Yet we struggle to understand our suffering and the suffering of the world around us. Give us insight as we study this topic. Give us strength to share our stories, even when they include pain. Help us to hear your voice and help us to grow as we learn what it means to suffer faithfully. Help us to not be afraid of hard questions or of approaching your throne with them. Thank you that we have a high Priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

Read the poem “Minstrel Man” by Langston Hughes (easily found online). How does Hughes characterize suffering in this poem? Who do you think the poem is addressed to? How does the poem relate to your experiences?

FINAL REFLECTIONS

To understand suffering we have to understand Jesus—but that is not an overnight accomplishment! Ask the Spirit to guide you and to give you a deeper understanding of Christ and his suffering as you read this book. Are there hard thoughts you need to repent over? Are there honest questions that you need to take to your Father? Maybe you simply need to practice silence for five minutes and reflect again on the imagery of Zephaniah 3:17. Feel free to sketch or write in this space.

Chapter 2: Don't Answer Why

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the “reality of faith” and why does the logic of theodicy fail to find it? Why do intellectual arguments and research fail to comfort us?

What is a proper posture before God in our suffering?

But the psalms, which are full of struggle, do not point us to answers and formulas. Hope? Yes. Answers? No. The psalms orient us to God. Our hope is in him who made and redeemed heaven and earth, not in our own intellectual acuity.

What are some of the negative ways the Enlightenment has crept into our view of God and suffering?

A tragedy is still a tragedy; pain is still pain, even if some insight is gained in the process. We may hope that God has reasons for allowing suffering in his world, but that is very different from thinking we have access to those reasons or can understand why a particular experience of suffering is taking place.

How do the psalms of lament address these ideas?

Read Job 3. Notice the way that real suffering stands alongside the conviction that God is still present and good. What stands out to you?

Can you think of a time when you've turned to an unsatisfying theory rather than a practice? Have you ever pointed someone else in a similar direction?

Have you ever felt silenced as a sufferer? Have you ever (perhaps accidentally) silenced someone else? Why do you think many Christians feel the need to justify painful experiences through trite comments about God's purposes?

To theologize well, we need to love well.

What is the meaning of pastoral care? Read Jude 22-23. How should this affect our view of pastoral care?

How can we improve our ability to perform pastoral care? Be specific. Think of the things you say to hurting friends. What should change in your approach after reading this chapter?

PRAYER

Father, you love us so much that you are willing to listen to us. We cannot thank you enough for this mercy. Even when we have a million questions, your ears are always open. Forgive us when we turn to logic and research instead of reaching out to you for comfort. Give us patience when the answers come slowly. Help us to be better friends that listen well and enter into each other's pain with love and grace-filled consistency rather than quick answers. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

Read the poem "Acquainted with the Night" by Robert Frost (easily found online). What does the night symbolize? How does the poem relate to your experiences? Reflect on the ways that you can enter each other's "nights."

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Perhaps you have been silenced in your pain. Perhaps you need to repent for a time when you silenced a sufferer yourself. As you reflect on this chapter, try naming your suffering or pain. Ask God your questions. Use this space to process however you need to: sketch, write, scribble, and so on

Chapter 3: Longing and Lament

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What surprised you about this chapter?

We know that harmony between people, between humanity and the land, between our heads and hearts, between heaven and earth is not just an object of our desire but is good and true.

How can we experience the absence of good and not grow bitter? What do we do with that bitterness?

What does defiant hope look like for you?

Rejecting both utopianism on the one hand and despair on the other leads us to what might be called defiant hope.

How do you react to the idea that lament is expected (29)?

The devaluing of lament often betrays our failure to admit that our suffering is real and painful. When have you failed to admit this?

How does lament work as a coping mechanism, according to Daniel J. Simundson (31)?

Why do we have an obligation to mourn? What do you need to mourn over?

The pendulum swing between “joyful hope” and “jarring grief” can be exhausting. How do we let them dwell together in our hearts without growing hard? Have you ever experienced a similar situation? How did you deal with it?

Which square do you most relate to on the hope-lament quadrant (33)? Why?

When we choose not to lament, we harden our hearts.

What do you tend to turn to instead of lamenting to your Father?

How does your church body make space for lament? How could it be better?

Can you think of an example of lament that seems right?

PRAYER

Father, we know that you are present and powerful, and that you love us. But we often feel swallowed by the darkness and pain around us. When will you take it away? When will there be peace? Relief? Thank you that you hear our laments. Teach us to lament better, teach us to be honest in our pain. Be gracious to us as we learn to lament. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

It seems sometimes that non-Christians have a better sense of how to lament over pain and grief than we do. Joan Didion wrote a memoir about the year after her husband's unexpected death called *The Year of Magical Thinking*. She wrote, "Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life."¹ Her portrayal of grief is honest and raw, and occasionally shocking. Do you express your grief? Do you feel comfortable expressing your grief or pain or heartache?

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Walter Brueggemann said this about the psalms of lament: “The laments are refusals to settle for the way things are. They are acts of relentless hope that believe no situation falls outside Yahweh’s capacity for transformation. No situation falls outside of Yahweh’s responsibility.”²

Reread the common elements of lament on page 37. Using this as your guide (but not a rule book), write your own lament. You might also look at the psalms mentioned throughout the chapter and at Bob’s lament on pages 34-35 for help, but make this your own.

Hope does not rule out the need for mourning in our lives but rather demands it, because our hope itself tells us that our brokenness is wrong. . . . Hope does not answer all of our questions. Christian hope does *not* mean a cessation of lament, since these two often go together.

Chapter 4: Embracing Our Embodiment

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Who are you? Think about what you would have said before reading this chapter.

How does your body relate to who you are?

How has our culture (e.g., social media, plastic surgery) affected the way you see your body?

How can you affirm the dignity of your body in all its limitations? What about affirming the bodies of others?

“Put differently, communion with God and others was always meant to take place in and through the body, not apart from it. This was our created state; this will be our ultimate hope” (46). What is ultimately hopeful to you about this statement?

To encounter another, even in an unfallen world, is to encounter our finitude, our limits—never meant as a curse, yet always crucial to our happiness and life. We are embodied creatures, after all.

Do you ever think about glorifying God through your relationships with others by how you use your body? How would you do this?

Reread the Herman Bavinck quote on page 47. How does it make you feel that the body is “a marvelous piece of art”?

The original grace of human companionship becomes a curse to us, for we see others as threats, as endlessly needy and demanding of us. Limits and love are interwoven in our bodily existence and consequent relationships.

In your answer to “Who are you?” do you see evidence of Enlightenment thinking or the “postmodern body” that is discussed on page 48? What kinds of things make it hard for you to answer this question?

Have you had an experience that changed the way you viewed your body? Was it negative or positive, and why?

In what ways do you need to see yourself more holistically? How can you honor the fact that, by definition of being human, you are body and soul?

How do other people's bodies affect the way you see them and interact with them? How do your limits (as an embodied being) affect your relationships? Think about both negative and positive examples.

How does your body affect the way you view or interact with God? Has that changed after reading this chapter?

PRAYER

Father, how marvelously you have made us! Thank you for creating us with bodies and souls. Help us to understand our limitations, especially when it comes to our pain. We long for the day when we will all have whole bodies, renewed by your great mercy. Forgive us when we treat our earthly bodies with little concern. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

There is a danger in separating our view of the body from Christ. Flannery O'Connor once wrote an introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, the account of a little girl who was badly disfigured by cancer and who died very young, but touched everyone that knew her with her love for life.

Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann's, full of promise. . . . One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with Him. . . . In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eyes of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness, which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror.¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Give yourself half an hour. Maybe you can take a walk or sit somewhere quietly. Notice your body, how it feels to breathe or smell or see. Think about the ways your body mediates the way you experience life. Write down how your perspective of your body has changed after reading this chapter. What do you hope will change? Thank God for the specific ways he has created you, while still acknowledging the brokenness of your body.

Chapter 5: Questions That Come with Pain

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How are we, as Christians, to live in the midst of pain?

How can you be more empathetic to the pain of others?

The book discusses the dangers of denying our pain (stoicism) versus romanticizing our pain (58-59). Which side do you find yourself on? What dangers have you experienced on that side?

The church has always believed that we do not testify properly to God if we lie about the state of the world.

The untiring siren call of the future—with its grand plans to be accomplished, vacations to be had, retirements to be enjoyed—can become so strong it swallows our ability to live in the *now*. This often means people fail to be fully present, to live in the moment.

How do you respond to the idea that a healthy realism means meditating on death?

How does the future deny you the present? How can you specifically embrace your mortality and weakness? How do you try to avoid embracing death and how does that hurt your ability to stay present?

How do you exist well in the present? When do you struggle with it the most?

How do we reach a healthy perspective on death without giving into fear and depression?

How do we treat the present as a gift when it is *so hard*? How can you be grateful in those moments?

How do you genuinely rest? What does it look like for you?

Read Job 10. How does Job recognize death and weakness? How do we accept the mystery of suffering?

What kind of friend are you when someone close to you suffers? Are you one of Job's friends?

How does a messianic reading of Job give us answers?

PRAYER

Father, you are so gracious to hear our cries. It is so easy to give up on the present moment when it is full of pain and misery. We struggle to live in the tension between the now and the not yet. Help us to voice our pain and be honest with each other. Help us not to long for the future so much that we miss out on the mercies you shower on us every day. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

G. K. Chesterton wrote this in his "Introduction to Job,"

The book of Job is chiefly remarkable, as I have insisted throughout, for the fact that it does not end in a way that is conventionally satisfactory. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement. But in the prologue we see Job tormented not because he was the worst of men, but because he was the best. It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes. Here is the very darkest and

strangest of the paradoxes; and it is by all human testimony the most reassuring. I need not suggest what high and strange history awaited this paradox of the best man in the worst fortune. I need not say that in the freest and most philosophical sense there is one Old Testament figure who is truly a type; or say what is prefigured in the wounds of Job.¹

Reflect on the ways the coming of Jesus is evident in the book of Job.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Think about what's going on in your life right now. Are there longings that are distracting you from being present today? Give yourself five minutes to be quiet, calm your heart and focus on what's happened today that you can thank God for. Maybe first you will need to think about all of the things that you are currently struggling with. Use this space to journal or make a list as you reflect.

PART II

THE STRANGENESS OF GOD

Chapter 6: One with Us

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does it make you feel that God takes responsibility for the suffering in the world?

God's response to this chaos and sin and suffering is that God *takes responsibility!* God himself comes forward to deal with the mess. . . . The way that God takes responsibility for our condition is by becoming one of us.

Do you think of Jesus as a particular person? How does the physicality of Jesus lead us into a deeper relationship with our Creator?

How does adoption into the family of God restore our fellowship with him?

Kapic, drawing on Athanasius, points out that we are tempted to “pit heaven against earth, spirituality against physicality, Old against New Testament” (77-78). What ways are you tempted by this split?

On page 79, the book mentions the particularity of creaturely life and the way Jesus is a particular human being, yet can identify with both sexes. Have you ever thought about this? What’s your response?

The Creator has called to his creation, and the Word who first called the creation into existence has now entered the world of flesh and blood. He has come. The only thing that could possibly be more stunning than the fact that he comes is the discovery that he comes to die.

We have a chance, through the incarnation, to have a restored vision of the God who is, rather than a distorted image of a god we fear.

What ways do you need to reorganize your thoughts about the incarnation?

Do you feel like your vision of God is skewed? In what specific ways?

How does the evidence of Jesus' emotions call us to revisit the land of lament and longing?

What human emotions do you most often connect with Jesus?

Behind this power of compassion was Jesus' wholehearted love toward those around him. Warfield notes that the Messiah's "prime characteristic was love, and love is the foundation of compassion." Jesus lives in love for his Father and a love for sinful humanity.

How did Jesus embody compassion during his ministry before the cross?

How do the emotions of Jesus (compassion, anger, mournfulness) cause you to reconsider the way you think about and interact with your Father?

PRAYER

Father, you are good. You did not abandon your good creation to suffer and wallow in sin forever. You came. We forget, sometimes, the blessing that comes through the incarnation of Jesus. We forget that he came to experience the pain of our fallen bodies and that he endured it all to save us. Thank you for your great love for us. Give us a greater appreciation and understanding of the work of Jesus and the beauty of his physical body. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you. . . .
Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”
As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God. (Psalm 42:6-11)

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Read Exodus 3:7-10. Reflect on the ways that God’s knowledge of our suffering is different and deeper through the incarnation. Jesus came to

understand our physical pain as well as to save us from our spiritual pain. Reflect on the humanity of Christ, his physical body and the human emotions that he felt during his life on earth. Use this space to sketch or journal as you meditate.

Chapter 7: One for Us

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When have you fallen into the trap of an atomized reading of the Bible? How do you keep the whole story of the gospel in mind?

God, who cannot get sick, who cannot grow hungry, who cannot bleed, who cannot die—*this* God comes near so that the impossible becomes possible. . . . Solidarity, representation, and hope suddenly materialize in unexpected and even disturbing ways as the truth of Jesus' full identity emerges—in this way he is both "with us" and "for us."

How does dividing the physical side from the spiritual side of Jesus' life distort our understanding of the gospel?

Read Hebrews 2:10-11 and Hebrews 10:10. What does our salvation rest upon?

Are you tempted to ignore the physical life of Jesus?

Do you ever feel alienated from God because your struggles seem too “earthly” for you to bring to him? How does this chapter address our suffering?

The biblical story is necessarily a physical one, as well as spiritual, from start to finish.

How do you react to the idea that God is able to know and understand what it means to be tempted as a human, as a particular person? Is this a new thought?

How is Jesus made complete in his suffering?

Our sufferings must always be understood through his. Thus our anguish can return us to grace and healing; by faith we see these pains point not merely to brokenness but to a good creation that has been compromised, and to an even better Creator who has come to renew creation and set it free.

How are we tempted to separate the physical healing from the spiritual healing in Jesus' life?

How does Isaiah show that physical suffering and spiritual brokenness are entangled? How can we appreciate that and understand the significance of Jesus' life and death?

Do we sugarcoat the incarnation too much?
How?

Even as our hearts can be prone to question, filled with dread and doubt, let us take confidence that our God personally understands us, not hypothetically but concretely in Christ.

How do our sickness and grief look different in Jesus? What is the real connection between Jesus and our suffering?

PRAYER

Father God, thank you for sending us your Son to understand us on a much deeper, physical level. Thank you that we live in the now and not yet. Help us to see our pain and suffering through the lens of the cross. Forgive us when we despair. Thank you, Jesus, for meeting spiritual and physical needs in your earthly ministry, as an example of how you care for us as embodied creatures. Help us to understand your love for us. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

In *The Last Sin Eater* Francine Rivers observes,

It was no accident, no coincidence, that the seasons came round and round year after year. It was the Lord speaking to us all and showing us over and over

again the birth, life, death, and resurrection of his only begotten Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. It was like a best-loved story being told day after day with each sunrise and sunset, year after year with the seasons, down through the ages since time began.¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

It's sometimes challenging to think about Jesus' humanity. Reflect on the Bible stories you know from the Gospels and thank God for sending his Son into our messy, messy world. Are you encouraged? Are you humbled? Put your thoughts and reactions into words.

Chapter 8: Risen and Remaining

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is your response to the story of the madman? How do we live in similar ways to the village people, trying to separate purpose and hope from God?

Have you ever faced the implications of godlessness that Nietzsche writes about?

The madman understood what all the others had not: the absence of God has everything to do with *this* life, with the present, with our struggle to find meaning *now*. And for our purposes, this has everything to do with our pain, our hurts, our fears, and our hopes.

When have you experienced fear and joy simultaneously?

Only as we look at the resurrected Jesus can we find courage to live through our pain, questions, and struggles. Looking at the risen Messiah we are brought to worship the one God who so loved his people that he became one of his people, took on true flesh and blood, including our pains, hunger, and weakness.

How does the story of Kelly's friend (111) affect the way you think about the resurrection of the body—when we rise from the dead?

Read Hebrews 7. What do you find comforting?

Do you see anything problematic with your reading of the Father-Son relationship (Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:34)? How do you view them?

Resurrection is not about denying this world but rather enabling believers to have an honest assessment of their experience and yet to have a real hope for restoration beyond it. Pain is real, but not the only reality.

Do you picture Jesus as human right now? How does it change your perspective of his current role in the kingdom?

How is pain not our only reality?

Why is a bodily resurrection the key to our hope?

PRAYER

Father, you are so in love with us that you have planned to rescue us through your power and creativity from the very beginning. We forget, sometimes, that you are the source of all our hope and purpose in life. Thank you for entering into a human body to understand our aches, temptations, joys, and pains. Thank you that you continue to live, even now, reigning and watching over us, embodying our need for restoration. Help us to rejoice in the empty tomb and to trust that Jesus understands our suffering. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

In a famous literary symbol of Christ's resurrection, the lion Aslan comes back to life after sacrificing himself for the boy Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. The two main characters that discover he is alive, Lucy and Susan, think that he is now even more alive than he seemed to be before his death. Their reaction to his physical appearance is a reminder of the joy we have (should have) in the physical body of our Savior.

They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane . . . stood Aslan himself.

"Oh Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy.

"Not now," said Aslan.

"You're not—not a—?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say that word *ghost*. Aslan stooped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

"Do I look it?" he said.

"Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy, and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

What does the empty tomb mean for you right now? What joy do you find in this amazing story of Jesus' resurrection? Reflect on the implications of the resurrection for your life currently. Be quiet and use this space to capture what that means for you today.

PART III

LIFE TOGETHER

Chapter 9: Faith, Hope, and Love

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Read 1 Corinthians 13. What stands out to you?

A common theme throughout *Embodied Hope* is the idea that we need to “maintain a realistic and honest assessment of the pain, and a radical and subversive hope that declares our present suffering is not all there is” (122). How do we maintain this perspective? How has that answer changed as you’ve read this book?

Luther never doubted the significance of faith, but he also never forgot how fragile it could become under stress. What was really at stake then was not merely his physical condition but his belief in God’s goodness and provision.

How do Luther and Kierkegaard characterize faith in a personal light?

How do you respond to the story of Luther's struggle with faith through his sickness? Has there been a similar episode in your life where physical suffering was or felt connected to spiritual suffering?

When have you suffered outside of a community of believers? When have you suffered inside? If you have experienced both, how do they compare?

Do you let people into your suffering? How do you let them in?

How do you see your fellow pilgrims embodying gospel promises? Is there a specific person or experience that comes to mind?

How can our fellow saints speak to God for us? How can they speak to us for God?

The psalms not only give us voice with which to pray to God, but in them we also hear God's voice to his people.

Do you rely on positive thinking instead of hope?
How do you combat that?

How can we genuinely hope without denying the pain or trying to escape it?

We experience divine love most concretely when we receive and give it to others. God expresses his love and extends his comfort through his people.

When have you applied faith or hope without love?

The flame of individual faith weakens when it is alone, but in true community the fire of faith illumines the night.

How have you been comforted or loved during a painful experience? Did you recognize that God's love was ultimately behind it?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you show us your love in amazing ways. Please surround us with community as we struggle. Forgive us when we make faith a solely personal endeavor, when we don't let others in to support us and help carry our burdens. Give us strength to carry our friends' struggles as we walk with them. Sometimes it's easy to forget that love is the greatest. Help us to live out our faith and hope in the context of love. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

Henri Nouwen observes,

It is my growing conviction that my life belongs to others just as much as it belongs to myself and that what is experienced as most unique often proves to be most solidly embedded in the common condition of being human.¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Find a psalm that resonates with you. Use the words to guide your prayer. You might memorize it and use it when prayer becomes difficult in times of struggle. Consider the ways that faith, hope, and love are evident in the psalm, or find ways to specifically include them in your own version of it.

Chapter 10: Confession and the Other

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does pain isolate you?

Have you ever thought your pain was a sign of condemnation? Why do you think you felt that way?

Have you ever, perhaps accidentally, connected someone's physical suffering to their sin?

Have you ever felt that people are accusing you of having pain as a result of your sin?

Are you better at hiding sin the older you get?

**To be under the cross
is to know the depths
of one's own sin.**

How do you respond to the idea that the ability to hide our sin is compromised when we are exhausted and in constant pain? Has this been your experience?

Has the approach of preaching the gospel to yourself ever been helpful? Can you think of other examples in Scripture that show this?

Why do we find it easier to admit our sins to God than to another Christian? Is that your experience?

“We need to hear the gospel from others, from outside ourselves. The power of the gospel preached personally to me from a faithful sister or brother has a power I cannot conjure for myself” (142). What benefits do you see to this?

Without others, we begin to imagine we are self-sufficient, in control, and all that we have is because of how faithful we have been. When this illusion sets upon us, we not only fail to see the truth about our need, but we also lose sight of the beauty and majesty of God.

Have you been surprised at another's confession of sin, or has someone reacted in surprise to your confession?

How do you live under the cross? Do you need to be further under it, by recognizing your own sin?

Through the presence of our fellow believer we receive the words, touch, embrace, and love of God.

Read the story of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19. What's the difference between cleansing and being made well? Have you felt the difference between the declaration of pardon and the experience of pardon? What was that like?

Have you ever thought about the idea that for us, meeting Jesus physically takes the form of meeting his body, the church? Does that change your perspective of the church at all?

PRAYER

Oh Father, you are mighty to save. You see the brokenness, you see the pain, and one day you will abolish it forever. We know that you are working in the present moment too, in the pain and in the brokenness. Pain unearths sin, and we struggle to see you in the midst of all the messiness. Give us strength to confess to each other, to acknowledge our sin in the presence of a fellow sinner. Teach us to be better listeners too. Help our vision of you not to be clouded by pain and sin—help us recognize the love you send through our community and praise you for it. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis says,

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Think about the people in your life that you really trust. Sometimes we are afraid that our closest friends and relatives will think badly of us if we confess certain sins. But friendships built on raw, real honesty are much stronger in the long run. As you were reading this chapter, what sin(s) especially stood out to you? Write what you would say in confession to that close friend or family member. After you've written something, challenge yourself and actually meet with that person to confess whatever is on your heart.

Chapter 11: Faithful

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do you suffer faithfully?

Frequently, what the sufferer needs most is not answers but a loving presence and lasting commitment.

Who have you suffered with? Who should you suffer with?

How can someone respond to their pain in despair without seeming to deny God? Have you experienced this before?

[The] witness is always twofold: acknowledging that our troubles are real and that God is unflinchingly faithful.

Do you have someone in your life who has witnessed (or is witnessing) to you in particular experiences of pain?

How can you grow in your ability to hear about others' pain?

Do you experience rest when someone validates your pain?

Believers are called to be confident, not in their physical stamina or . . . in their clever answers, but in their merciful God.

How do you balance dumping (talking too much about your pain) and also being an encouraging friend? How can we avoid competition in suffering?

In Jesus the Son of God, we discover God's solidarity with us, not just a fellow feeling but a *redemptive* solidarity. He absorbs our sin and enters into our pain, including our physical suffering and even death, not merely to better understand it but in order to overcome it.

What do you think of *Stellvertreter*? Have you ever experienced this or know someone who has?

What do you think of Ring Theory? Would this be helpful for you?

How can you honor the particularity of a person's pain? Does a specific situation come to mind?

What are ways that you try to avoid self-absorption?

What does mission need to look like in your life right now?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are big. You can handle all of our pain, our anger, our despair, our questions, our doubts, and our frustration. You show us so much grace. Forgive us for our self-absorption, when we fall into the trap of thinking we're the only one who suffers. Help us to love others better and to witness to each other's pain. Thank you that we can face the reality of pain in the context of the hope you provided through Jesus. Help us to remember what we've learned through this book and to integrate it into our lives. Amen.

OUTSIDE VOICES

Joni Eareckson Tada observes,

Suffering keeps swelling our feet so that earth's shoes won't fit. My atrophied legs and swollen ankles, curled fingers and limp wrists are visual aids in a children's Sunday school lesson on Isaiah 40: 6, 8: "All flesh is grass . . . the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (KJV). So I can, along with others who suffer, "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come. . . . He will come to save you.' Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. . . . Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:3-6, 10).¹

FINAL REFLECTIONS

You've just finished this book! Reflect on the things you've learned. What stands out to you? How has your perspective on faith and suffering been stretched? How have you grown? What do you want to carry into your everyday life as you move forward? Use this space to make a list, write down your favorite quotes, or journal a bit.

Outlines

CHAPTER 1: HARD THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD

► Introduction

- This book will not defend God.
- This book will struggle with questions of how to live in a pain-soaked world.

► Admitting the Complexity of Pain

- Simone Weil: importance of solidarity, the danger of isolation, and crippling effects of despair.
- Physical suffering affects how we relate to God and others.
- Limits are part of everyday life for sufferers.
- We need a holistic perspective on suffering.

► Tempted to Think Ill of God

- Despair can bring fear of divine indifference, rejection, or judgment.
- Hard thoughts versus honest questions.
- Problematic views of God are destructive and need to be changed.
- We must deepen our view of who God is—dig in and rebuild.
- We must understand Jesus to understand God and his relationship to our pain.

► Where We Are Going: An Overview of the Rest of the Book

- This book specifically addresses *Christians* who suffer.
- Suffering = associated with serious illness or pain.

CHAPTER 2: DON'T ANSWER WHY

► The Reality of Evil

► When Philosophers Should Be Silent

- Leibniz's *Theodicy*: How can there be so much pain in this world if such a God exists?
- The problem with Pangloss.

- Why we desperately need pastoral care.
- ▶ How the Church Responds to Suffering
 - Theories versus practice.
 - Approaching the question from the standpoint of faith.
 - The demand for reason and justification.
 - God as a mental construct.
- ▶ Don't Explain, But Do Listen and Love
 - We are not privy to God's ultimate purposes.
 - We need to recognize and deal with our limits and the complexity of human suffering.
 - Avoid the quick fix—how do we point people to Jesus as the Savior who entered genuine human suffering and eventually death to save us?
- ▶ Developing Pastoral Sensitivity and Theological Instincts
 - Empathy and orthodoxy both matter.
 - *Doing* theology is like farming, not stacking doctrinal bricks.
 - Pastoral care is understanding and meeting individual, specific needs.
 - Care about anthropology and theology.

CHAPTER 3: LONGING AND LAMENT

- ▶ Introduction
 - Our lives consist of light and darkness.
 - We long for *shalom*.
 - The middle ground = defiant hope.
- ▶ The Necessity of Lament
 - The great hope in lament is not all there is to experience.
 - Honest, expected battle.
 - Western civilization has thrown negative light on grief—cultural taboo.
 - Devaluing lament is a result of our failure to admit suffering is really painful.

- Lament and hope are not a linear relationship.
 - African American gospel traditions: deep lament + Christ and hope.
 - Without laments, our hearts are hardened.
- ▶ The Shape of Our Lament
- Truth: God’s good creation is compromised.
 - Psalms of lament are 40 percent of the Psalter.
 - Analogy of “framing.”
 - Biblical laments are a guide for our experience.
 - Make space for lament in the community of the church.
- ▶ The God of Our Lament
- *Sehnsucht*: yearning, craving, or sensing something is profoundly wrong or missing, nostalgia as longing for *shalom*.
 - A *full* lament is deadly; Jesus had to do it for us.
 - Our worst struggles remind us most of our need for safety and shelter.
 - Lament keeps us sane—but in the context of the human, Christian story.

CHAPTER 4: EMBRACING OUR EMBODIMENT

- ▶ Introduction
- Who are you? Body or soul?
- ▶ Our Bodily Self
- We need our bodies to exist.
 - Limitations are also a part of our creaturely life.
 - Biblical narratives affirm the dignity of human bodies, even the disabled ones.
- ▶ Created with Body and Soul
- Creation reached a crescendo when God created humans.
 - Made of dust (our body) and then breath (our soul/life).
 - Original human goodness included bodies, and those bodies were a blessing.
 - Early Gnostics believed the material body to be evil.

- ▶ Confusion Regarding Embodiment
 - Soul and body are meant to designate a holistic portrait of a human.
 - We tend to pit the physical against the spiritual.
 - » The Enlightenment elevated the mind; the body was weak.
 - » The postmodern body, disillusioned by a fragmented society, turned to sensuality and self-indulgence.
 - Physical redefinition (plastic surgery, Instagram filters) is the norm—this encourages objectification.
- ▶ Bonhoeffer on the Purpose of our Bodies
 - A human being *is* body and soul.
 - The peculiar meaningfulness is a connection between physicality and relationality.
 - Relationally, we are like the triune God.
 - Our freedom includes fellowship with other beings.
 - Love is connected with human finitude.
 - Our creaturely, bodily existence was designed for life-giving human relationships that occurred under the benediction of God.
- ▶ Physicality and Relationships
 - The proper manner of our embodied existence depends a lot on preestablished social norms.
 - The Western concept of the “bounded being” is problematic.
 - “In the beginning is the relationship”—Gergen.
 - We can’t know about the world through anything but our bodies.
 - We are created to be relational, to ultimately show God to others.

CHAPTER 5: QUESTIONS THAT COME WITH PAIN

- ▶ Introduction
 - Stark reality = broken bodies.
 - How do we live in the midst of pain?
 - Danger of denial.
 - Danger of romanticism.

- To testify honestly we shouldn't lie about the state of the world.
- ▶ Learning to Live in the Presence of Death
 - Meditating on death as a healthy realism.
 - We are fragile.
 - Heavenly-mindedness helps us to value the world as it is and each day as it comes.
 - Live in the present.
 - Our culture does not equip us to deal with death and suffering.
- ▶ Job's Lament and Our Pain
 - Wisdom literature should guide our anthropology.
 - How does Job reconcile the presence of suffering and the promise of divine care?
 - "How to be a Bad Friend" by Job's friends.
 - The ongoing struggle is our (only?) option.
 - God can handle your struggling and wrestling.
 - God engages Job in conversation, and he listens to Job.
- ▶ Conclusion
 - Job's answer is Jesus.

CHAPTER 6: ONE WITH US: INCARNATION

- ▶ Introduction
 - Connecting the dots brings us face to face with Jesus.
 - God takes responsibility for our condition by becoming one of us.
 - Tonya's story.
 - Adoption in the family of God means restored fellowship through the incarnation.
- ▶ Why the Creator Comes—Athanasius
 - *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*.
 - Points out tendency to pit heaven against earth, spirituality against physicality.

- The battle and our salvation necessarily takes place in and through human bodies—sin must be overcome in the body.
 - The incarnation represented all of us without compromising the concrete particularity of the humanity of Christ.
 - The fall corrupted our vision of God, too.
- Jesus' Emotions and Human Suffering—Warfield
- Our challenge to affirm the humanity of Christ.
 - Jesus' emotions call us to revisit the land of lament and longing, as well as promise and hope.
 - Warfield: a rationalistic theologian, but his marriage reveals his daily walk with suffering and pain, which reminded him of the fallen world.
 - Yet he also daily experienced the power of concrete love expressed in action.
 - Jesus was compassionate, angry, and mournful in his humanity.
- Conclusion
- Athanasius and Warfield understood how important the life of Jesus was for understanding the ways of God.

CHAPTER 7: ONE FOR US: CROSS

- Introduction
- Why does our physical suffering really matter?
- Jesus' Death Requires an Incarnate Life
- Danger of an atomized reading of the Bible; we forget about the incarnate *life*, ignoring that Jesus felt pain.
 - Sometimes we undervalue physical and overvalue spiritual matters.
 - We ignore physicality based on the legal nature of salvation.
 - He comes not just to die, but to live.
- His Death Is the Culmination of His Identification with Us
- Jesus' birth and growth is important to the gospel story.
 - We can only be sanctified through the body of Jesus.

- Hebrews 2:14-15.
 - He has experienced our suffering as a human.
 - The bloody prayer shows his real, continual suffering.
 - Jesus identifies with us in all things.
 - Salvation is linked to Jesus' whole life.
- By His Wounds We Are Healed
- Examples of Jesus' holistic ministry: spiritual and physical needs were met.
 - Experiential immersion.
 - Isaiah shows that physical suffering and spiritual brokenness are entangled. We need to appreciate that entanglement if we are to understand the significance of the Messiah's life and death.
 - He enters suffering for the purpose of overcoming it.
- Conclusion
- There is a real connection between our suffering and Christ's.
 - As the body of Christ we should participate in his present work.
 - God comforts so we should comfort each other.

CHAPTER 8: RISEN AND REMAINING

- Introduction
- What do you really believe?
- What If God Is Dead?
- The story of the madman.
 - Borrowing Christian capital and yet ignoring the source of transcendent meaning (God).
- An Empty Tomb
- "Afraid."
 - Mark provokes us with an ending full of questions.
- Consequences of Belief

- Nietzsche is willing to face the consequences of a godless world.
- The great testimony of divine presence and power is found in the incarnation.
- ▶ Do Not Be Afraid but Worship
 - Implications of Mark's ending.
 - Fear and joy.
 - Disciple's response is worship as they see Jesus' physical body.
- ▶ Our Hesitation
 - Deep realism of Matthew's account includes doubt.
 - Worship the risen Savior or not?
 - Only as we look at the resurrected Jesus can we find courage to live through our pain, questions, and struggles.
- ▶ Jesus' Resurrection Is a Bodily Resurrection
 - Why the resurrection is so essential.
- ▶ See and Touch
 - God affirms his creation by continuing to live in the flesh.
- ▶ Similar and Yet
 - N. T. Wright: Jesus is firmly embodied.
 - We will be the same yet different.
 - Matt's vision of being restored.
- ▶ Saved from What?
 - We are saved from the tyranny of death, from the finality.
 - Eternal life will not include suffering.
- ▶ Jesus, Our Ascended High Priest
 - The sympathetic high priest.
 - Don't let your picture of the Father and Son pit them against each other.
 - Jesus embodies our need and dependence before God.
 - Sometimes we forget that Jesus remains our incarnate Lord.

► Take Courage and Live

- Pain is not the only reality.
- Incarnation and cross indicate divine empathy and provision.
- Our hope is material for the re-created world.

► Conclusion

- We live in the now and not yet.

CHAPTER 9: FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

► Introduction

- “But the greatest of these is love.”
- Life as God’s people thus becomes the environment that sustains and nourishes those who suffer.
- The Christian life requires a *people*—only together can we believe, hope, and love amid our struggles.

► Faith

- Søren Kierkegaard: faith is an unavoidable personal reality, and we have to respond to those demands personally.
- Luther: faith as the manner of existence for the Christian.
- Luther’s emphasis on faith is shaped by his struggle with sickness.
- Luther never doubted the significance of faith, yet he was very aware of its fragility under stress.
- Pain makes you more aware of the darkness.
- Luther asked his friends for support through their prayers.
- Physical challenges open up spiritual challenges.
- Luther recognized the need for others—faith is never solely individual, because we must bear each other’s burdens.

► Hope

- It’s a far more difficult call to trust in God’s holy kindness and tender provision than to affirm his existence.
- Hope nourishes faith.

- The soul-strengthening church—the meeting place of particularity and community.
- Psalms show movement from anxiety to hope through remembrance and anticipation.
- The psalms resonate because they speak to our struggles.
- Hebrews: faith and hope go together, but hope is not an escape or denial.
- We need God's people to declare the gospel promises for us sometimes.

► Love

- The relationship of the three is important to each aspect.
- Union with Christ is part of our union with each other.
- *Without love* we lose faith and hope.
- Baking the cake of love.
- We must not ultimately look *to* faith, hope, and love, but rather look *with* them to the images of incarnation, the cross, and resurrection.

CHAPTER 10: CONFESSION AND THE OTHER

► Introduction

- Suffering = feeling the weight of this broken world.
- Three stories: Josh, Annie, and Samantha.
- Pain often encourages isolation.
- Multidimensional hurt.

► Pain and Punishment

- Chronic pain may connect to fear of punishment.
- Sometimes others accuse, subtly or indirectly.
- Cultural movement away from accusatory language.
- We still need to recognize and discuss sin.

► Pain and Acknowledging Our Sin

- Jesus warns against the question that more sin = more suffering.
- Our age makes us better at hiding sin.

- That ability is compromised when we're exhausted and in constant pain.
 - Luther's experience with the devil in the room.
 - Physically healthy people can easily convince themselves that they don't have big sin problems.
 - Danger in overindividualization.
 - We need others and we need confession.
- Confession of Sin and Our Need for Fellow Believers
- *Life Together* (1938) by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
 - Why are others helpful for confession?
 - » We are often confessing to and forgiving ourselves.
 - » Friends can help us break the circle of self-deception.
 - » God forgives our specific sins.
 - Who is qualified to hear confessions?
 - » (1) A sinner and (2) someone living under the cross of Christ.
 - » Hidden sins cultivate unhealthy habits and prevent genuine communion.
 - » Confession heals the individual and the community.
 - What does confession do?
 - » It gives us the experience of pardon.
 - » We encounter Jesus and the promise of complete healing one day.
 - » Confession requires painful honesty.
 - » The story of the ten lepers.
- Meeting Christ in the Other
- Recognizing the potential for abuse.
 - We must learn to be faithful listeners to and hearers of confession.
 - The body reflects the Jesus of the gospel to us.
- Take, Eat, and Drink
- In Jesus' name the church (through ordained ministers) offers the words of pardon and assurance as they officiate the Lord's Supper.

► Conclusion

- We need people who will be *with* us.

CHAPTER 11: FAITHFUL

► Commitment

- Chronic pain eventually gets ignored or forgotten by others.
- Faithful suffering is not a sprint.

► Witness

- The suffering and the coping will be different.
- We can respond in anger or despair without denying God.
- Witnessing to the church body is just as important as witnessing to nonbelievers—especially during hard seasons.
- We need to learn from the black church tradition.
- Witnessing to another's pain gives them rest.

► Compassion

- To “suffer” “together with.”
- Bonhoeffer: living a life for others is the goal of Christianity.
- Examples of *Stellvertreter*—taking on the pain of another.
- Compassion is risky!

► Particularity

- Ring Theory and kvetching.
- The key is honoring the particularity of a person's pain.

► Mission

- Pain forces hard work to avoid self-absorption.
- Mission allows sufferers to look behind themselves and experience God's grace and love as it is extended to others.

► Confident

- Confidence in our merciful God.
- Present suffering is confessed but it is not final!

- Chris and the cluster headaches story.
- Psalm 44.
- Confidence in Christ.

Notes

DEAR READER

¹Thanks to McKenzie Barham for serving as the primary person responsible for preparing this study guide. David Ragland also provided valuable assistance in the guide's preparation.

3 LONGING AND LAMENT

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²Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 29.

4 EMBRACING OUR EMBODIMENT

¹Flannery O'Connor, "Introduction to the Memoir of Mary Anne," *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 830.

5 QUESTIONS THAT COME WITH PAIN

¹G. K. Chesterton, "Introduction to the Book of Job," *American Chesterton Society*, accessed April 21, 2017, www.chesterton.org/introduction-to-job.

7 ONE FOR US: CROSS

¹Francine Rivers, *The Last Sin Eater* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998).

8 RISEN AND REMAINING

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950).

9 FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

¹Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

10 CONFESSION AND THE OTHER

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960).

11 FAITHFUL

¹Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 202-3.