



How Hardship Shapes Us  
for Ministry and Mission

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by Paul Borthwick and Dave Ripper.

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## Suffering Comes with the Territory

*Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo . . . the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.*

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE,  
A TWENTIETH CENTURY TESTIMONY

**SUFFERING FINDS US ALL.** Every last one of us. Its forms are as varied, numerous, and unique as the very people on earth who experience its consequences. There is no getting around the reality that to be alive is to experience suffering.

But what actually is suffering? We know its causes: disease, disappointment, and death, to name a few. We know its effects: despair, distress, disillusionment, and desolation, to provide a far-from-complete list. But what is suffering in its essence?

For me (Paul) the person who has personally and through her writings had the greatest impact on my perspective on hardship and suffering is Elisabeth Elliot. Though many younger people don't know her story, it bears summarizing—if only to her establish her credibility related to the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Born into a missionary family with five siblings, Elisabeth Howard grew up a shy, awkward introvert demonstrating what we might identify today as some of the challenges of being a “Third-Culture Kid.” Her first boyfriend, Jim Elliot, professed his love for her while they were students at Wheaton College, but he decided to leave her behind and go as a single man into missionary service.

Elisabeth also went to serve in Ecuador as a single woman missionary in the early 1950s. After months of translation work, all her research was destroyed by fire, a story related in her book *These Strange Ashes: Is God Still in Charge?* This was her first and earliest written reflection on suffering and disappointment.

Jim eventually pursued her, and they married. She knew Jim as a passionate man, and his zeal for Christ attracted her. She also knew that Jim and four others had set their hearts on reaching the Auca tribe (now called the Huarani, Waorani, or Waodani people) in Ecuador's eastern Amazon region. Jim and his colleagues worked for months to establish contact with these remote people. Finally they set a time to meet them.

Upon their first encounter, Jim and his colleagues were speared to death, leaving widows and single-mother families behind.<sup>2</sup> A year later, Elisabeth and her one-year-old daughter, Valerie, joined with a single woman missionary, Rachel Saint, to live with the Auca people.<sup>3</sup>

After completing her missionary service, Elisabeth Elliot (she kept Jim's surname as her pen name) married Addison Leitch, a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Soon after, Dr. Leitch was diagnosed with leukemia and died after a long and

painful ordeal. Her deep reflections on suffering became the subject of many books, and in the latter twentieth century Mrs. Elliot became a prominent voice of understanding and comfort related to suffering.<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth would later marry Lars Gren and continue writing, speaking, and hosting a radio program called “Gateway to Joy” into the early twenty-first century. She died in 2015.

If anyone has earned the right to offer a definition of suffering, Elisabeth Elliot surely has. She provides what may be the most all-encompassing, all-inclusive definition of suffering, which has helped us understand both the expanse and subjectivity of suffering: “*Suffering is having what you don’t want, or wanting what you don’t have.*”<sup>5</sup>

Who on earth doesn’t *have something they don’t want*? Cancer or some other chronic disease. Infertility. Depression. Indebtedness. The experience of domestic abuse. Suffering as a result of systemic racism. A drug- or alcohol-addicted child. The sudden loss of a spouse. Traumatic memories of a family tragedy.

*Or want something they don’t have*? A loving spouse. Reclaiming wasted years. A home in a peaceful neighborhood. Family members who follow Jesus Christ. A disabled child healed.

Who do you know who doesn’t wish they could make something in their life either go away for good or appear with permanence? Ponder this for a moment yourself: What do *you* have that you don’t want? What do *you* want that you don’t have?

The bottom line: your personal and particular kind of suffering *counts* as suffering. Some things (like being ostracized from your family) might be specific sufferings *for* Jesus, but suffering in all forms draw us into the fellowship of those who suffer. Whatever kind of pain or suffering you’re experiencing, it’s real, it’s acknowledged, and God stands with you and is present with you.

You suffer. We all suffer. Forgive our bluntness, but suffering—in so many forms—sucks!

Those of us who consider ourselves Christians are no exception either. In fact, we are not only included in the human experience of suffering but are given widespread biblical witness to prepare us for suffering that might have been avoided had we chosen not to follow Christ: persecution, hardship, relational turmoil, loneliness, confusion, seasons of spiritual darkness. The suffering Christians experience is as varied as the suffering all humans experience. And often just as unpredictable and every bit as painful.

The witnesses to Christian suffering seem relentless. Jesus was explicit: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24 ESV). “In this world you *will* have trouble” (John 16:33).

James was insistent: “Count it all joy . . . *when* you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2 ESV). Not *if* but *when*.

Paul was unapologetic: “There’s a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world—the kind of suffering Christ takes on” (Colossians 1:24 *The Message*).

Scripture is emphatic: suffering, in all its forms, is an unequivocal, inescapable part of not only the fallen human condition but the Christian life. Given this reality, we must ask, *How can we learn to live as fully and faithfully as possible, despite the unavoidable, unwelcome presence of suffering?* This is the driving question of the book.

## **The Territory of Ministry**

A couple of years ago my wife, Erin, planned the ultimate thirtieth birthday present for me (Dave). She arranged for us to travel from Boston to Montana to meet one of my favorite writers, Eugene Peterson, and his wife, Jan, at their home on Flathead Lake. Peterson has written close to three dozen books on spiritual theology and pastoral ministry, but is best known for his translation of the Bible, *The Message*. Pastor Pete, as many of his former

congregants called him, is a pastor's pastor who has spoken most honestly about the challenges and temptations that come with pastoring in the late modern world. For those tempted to do God's work the world's way, Peterson's words resound piercingly and prophetically like a "voice calling out in the wilderness."

Over lunch Erin spoke very vulnerably about just how tough her life as both a mental-health therapist and pastor's wife can be. She described her experience as feeling like she walks around with a constant weight that's heavy, isolating, and even sickening at times. She admitted that she wasn't prepared for this—even with an excellent seminary education.

As Eugene listened compassionately to Erin's words, he leaned across the table and said something we've never forgotten. "Suffering comes with the territory." And then after a long pause, "Loneliness comes with the territory." Through the well-worn expressions on the Petersons' faces, they made it clear that behind the bestselling books and outward ministry successes were many dark, lonely, and painful seasons of life. They made no effort to pretend otherwise. To follow Jesus is to endure hardship. It doesn't matter what our role or vocational calling is, or even how outwardly successful we might seem. The same thing is true for everyone who follows Christ: suffering comes with the territory.

### **Accepting the Unwelcome Reality**

The day we spent with the Petersons has taught us two indispensable things about living fully and faithfully in a suffering-filled world. In spite of our human desire to run from or anesthetize ourselves from hardship, we must first *accept* the reality of suffering. It comes not only with the terrain of being human but with the territory of following Christ. There is great power found in coming to terms with this. As we learn to understand that suffering will be a significant factor in our lives, suffering loses its power to take us by surprise.

Personal experience teaches us that often the more pain catches us off guard, the less capable we are of enduring it well. In other words, the pain we never see coming seems to be the hardest for us to overcome. Yet by learning to accept suffering's unwelcome presence in our lives, we can weaken its capacity to catch us by surprise. As suffering's ability to surprise us decreases, our ability to withstand hardship often increases. We see this reality forcefully at work in the life of the apostle Paul.

In several portions of Paul's writings, he outlines what have been referred to as his "catalog of afflictions" (see Romans 8:35; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10). These hardships included imprisonments, beatings, a stoning, three shipwrecks, hunger, thirst, nakedness, sleepless nights, anxiety for the churches, "a thorn in the flesh," and all the accompanying dangers of traveling in the ancient world. Yet despite all these horrific experiences, Paul's letters do not seem to suggest that any of these things came as a great surprise to him. He seemed ready for them. While his readiness didn't diminish the pain of such persecution and hardship, we believe it made them more endurable. His *durability* might be what enabled him to live as fully and faithfully to Christ as he did in the face of such hostile opposition.

How did Paul come to be so prepared to experience hardship? Perhaps his readiness for all the suffering he experienced in following the call of Christ came from his earliest moments as a Christian. We learn in Acts 9, during Paul's conversion to Christ, that God would "show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16 NRSV). While we cannot say this with total certainty, it seems possible that this vision of suffering for the sake of Jesus' name came to be something Paul not only regularly accepted but continually expected. Suffering would always accompany his ministry. If this hypothesis is true—that

Paul's readiness to suffer diminished suffering's dominion over him—then Paul's example potently demonstrates that the effect of suffering can be weakened as we come to accept that suffering should be expected.

### **Accept the Unexpected Invitation**

The second lesson we learned from the Petersons was more implicit but every bit as important. If we are first to accept the unwelcome reality of suffering in order to live more fully and faithfully, then we must accept the unexpected invitation of suffering: *fellowship*. Suffering invites us to forge a kind of fellowship we never could have cultivated any other way.

Generally speaking, when friendships and new relationships are made, they're formed out of shared interests. Both parties might enjoy hiking, a similar kind of cuisine, or fantasy literature. A new relationship then emerges and grows out of the connection between one or more of these *shared pleasures*. But as powerful as shared pleasures are for forming relationships, *shared sufferings* may be even more potent.

As Erin and I reflected on the realities of suffering that the Petersons shared with us, we felt new life breathed into our weary souls. Their sufferings validated and brought comfort to our own. Contrary to what our fears and emotions told us, we were not the only ones who faced the struggles of life and ministry that we endured. We were not the only ones who ever felt so alone. We were, in fact, in quite good company. Not merely with people we admired as profoundly as Jan and Eugene, but with many more brothers and sisters committed to following the way of Jesus in a God-dismissive world. The Petersons' counsel not only affirmed this truth for us but invited us to see new opportunities to share in this kind of relationship with others. Out of this awareness, not only *friendship* has

grown between us and other fellow sufferers, but also something far greater, *fellowship*. This connection is what we are calling “the fellowship of the suffering.”

## **Welcome to the Fellowship**

The fellowship of the suffering identifies the new bonds of communion forged out of the crucible of suffering. Scripture—particularly Paul’s writings—seem to indicate that there is an interconnected, paradoxical relationship between suffering and fellowship.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in Romans 8:17, Paul writes that if “we *suffer with* him [Christ],” then “we may also be glorified with him” (NRSV; italics added). The words *suffer with* in Greek are a form of the word *sympaschō*, which combines two words: *syn*, meaning “together,” and *paschō*, meaning “suffer.” It’s a word unique in Scripture to Paul and connotes the idea of “sharing suffering together.” Thus for Paul, suffering and fellowship can coincide harmoniously, however disparate they may at first seem. When fellowship is forged out of suffering, it creates a kingdom-advancing communion that offers everyone who suffers the opportunity to live more fully and faithfully. This communion fosters fellowship in the three most fundamental realms of relationship in our lives: (1) fellowship with Christ, (2) fellowship with others, and (3) fellowship with the world.

## **Fellowship with Christ**

While we are never given an explanation as to why God allows such terrible suffering to occur in our world, we are given a God who suffers—a God who suffers *for us*. He “took up our pain” and “bore our suffering” by willingly subjecting himself to being “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” on the cross (Isaiah 53:4-5). Unfathomably, God the Father allowed excruciating pain and suffering to be experienced by Jesus, God the

beloved Son, in inexplicable ways: “It was the Lord’s will to *crush him* and *cause him* to suffer” (Isaiah 53:10; italics added). The God who created us is a God “of suffering,” one “familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53:3). This God invites us to share our sufferings with him. He will not give us pat answers when we come to him; he will give us himself.

In his letter to the Philippians the apostle Paul models for us how we might accept suffering’s unexpected invitation to share fellowship with God: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11 NRSV). Often the interpretive temptation with this verse is to believe Paul is seeking to know three things: (1) Christ, (2) the power of the resurrection, and, as the American Standard Version translates it, (3) “the fellowship of his sufferings.” None of us, if we’re being honest, really wants to suffer, so we opt to pursue knowing Christ himself and the power of his resurrection, while conveniently leaving out or forgetting the suffering part. Our cross-stitched pillows and mass-produced scriptural artwork prove it. They merely read, “I want to know Christ” —Philippians 3:10.

The omitted parts may be the most glaring absence in the lives of Christians today—ourselves included.

Almost certainly, though, Paul is not resolving to know three things, but one—namely, Jesus—spelled out in two distinct ways. Essential to knowing Christ is knowing “the power of his resurrection.” Because he has conquered death, his resurrection guarantees the resurrection of all who trust in him. Without knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection and the promise of our resurrection in him, our present sufferings would be senselessly harsh and unbearable. Our hope would be in vain. Therefore, in our efforts to know Christ personally, it is paramount that we study closely and

remind ourselves continually of the strength inherent in Jesus' death-conquering resurrection.

But while we can almost hear ourselves declaring wholeheartedly alongside Paul, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection," we cannot stop there. We must also soberly and courageously continue along in the resolution "I want to know Christ . . . and the fellowship of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." For apart from sharing in his sufferings, we'll only pursue knowing Christ partially, not fully. That omission will not only impoverish our faith individually but diminish our witness collectively. Thus, we must pursue knowing Christ not only as our resurrected King, but as our suffering Servant.

Part two of this book is devoted to this very effort. We enter into fellowship with our suffering God by first sharing our struggles and pain openly and honestly with him. After all, he is the only one who truly can identify with whatever we're going through. In chapter four we'll explore ways to pray to God—even when we don't want to—in order that we might cultivate an intimate and unbreakable solidarity with him.

Knowing Christ through the fellowship of his sufferings will undoubtedly have a transformative effect on our character. We will "become like him in his death," as we pursue communion with him in fellowship and prayer. In chapter five, we'll explore more thoroughly just how our hardships form our character for ministry and mission by giving our lives cruciform shape. Particularly, we'll discover how the process of being conformed to Christ in his death is a central way in which we can reach one of the primary goals of the Christian life: reflecting the image of the suffering Christ.

Accompanying this kind of cross-like transformation in our character is a pervasive and undeniable *joy*. In chapter six, we'll consider how joy is mysteriously compatible with even our worst

suffering. Even though everything in our lives might not be okay, through fellowship with Christ we remain okay.

To summarize: the fellowship of the suffering is first of all—foundationally and indispensably—fellowship with our suffering Servant and resurrected King, Jesus Christ.

## **Fellowship with Others**

The second aspect of the fellowship of the suffering, deriving from the first, is fellowship with others. Our suffering God not only invites us to share in communion with him through our suffering, but to enter into solidarity with his people, his body—the church. There are both helpful and hurtful ways to go about this.

The name most synonymous with suffering in the Scriptures is Job. He lived a good life and grew well-accustomed to living a blessing-filled lifestyle. Yet all of that changed in an instant when he learned that his wealth and family had been wiped out. His livestock, gone. His children, killed. To add still another layer of suffering atop these tragedies, Job's body was afflicted with a horrific case of boils. Enter Job's so-called friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

These friends get off to a wise start in attempting to bring consolation to Job by simply sitting with him in silence for seven days and nights. After this, Job breaks the silence by cursing the day he was born. This first word spoken by Job opens the door for his friends to try to have the last word about why he is suffering and what he should do about it. Things go downhill fast from here. However noble their intentions, the friends' unsolicited counsel is a prime example of "when helping hurts."<sup>7</sup>

Eliphaz conclusively tells Job with prophetic confidence that his suffering is evidence of his sin. There is a clear-cut case of cause and effect going on here. Job sinned, thus Job suffers. What other

explanation could there be? Shockingly, Job doesn't find this overly reassuring or helpful.

Bildad takes a different approach. He essentially contends that in comparison to the greatness of God, Job is pretty insignificant (Job 25:5-6). Who does Job think he is to expect an explanation from the God of the universe? While Bildad rightly magnifies God in his exhortation, he wrongly minimizes the people God made in his image, by surmising that God doesn't have time for them. Even though some of what Bildad communicates has theological truth behind it, the cruelly impersonal way he shares this message chokes out any of the life found within it. What Job needs isn't solution but understanding.

The third friend, Zophar, doesn't do much better than Eliphaz or Bildad. Instead of listening to Job or empathizing with his plight, Zophar pushes Job toward good works. He counsels Job, "If you direct your heart rightly . . . your life will be brighter than the noonday" (Job 11:13, 17 NRSV). In other words, to solve his problems, Job must do good deeds.

Given these "friendly" interventions, is it any wonder that Job concludes that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are "worthless physicians" and "miserable comforters" (Job 13:4; 16:2 NRSV)? In Job's time of crisis his immediate need was not for the *solution* to his problems but for *solidarity* amidst his suffering. His friends' attempts at comforting Job are helpful at least in showing us how not to attempt fellowship with those who suffer.

In contrast to this, the apostle Paul offers us a more loving way to help those who are hurting. In likening the church to the body of Christ, he writes in 1 Corinthians 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (NRSV). The same word used to describe our fellowship with Christ's sufferings in Romans 8:17, *sympaschō*, is used here to

describe how we are to suffer together as members of one body, the church. Just as we can pursue living fully and faithfully by seeking fellowship with Christ in our times of suffering, so we can cultivate fellowship with the body of Christ by learning to share our afflictions with one another. To do this we must be both available to others when they suffer and vulnerable about our own sufferings with others. As we do this, our unwelcome sufferings can produce unexpected fellowship with others like we've never experienced before.

In part three of this book, we'll explore this dynamic more fully by examining how solidarity within the church is birthed out of adversity. This will be the primary focus of chapter seven. Then, in chapter eight, we'll discover how this kind of fellowship formed within the body of Christ can be extended to those outside the walls of our churches, including our neighbors, coworkers, and friends. We'll contend that in our suffering-filled world pain can become the new common ground in which faith conversations empathetically emerge.

## **Fellowship with the World**

The third realm of relationship that suffering invites us into is fellowship with the world. We haven't been welcomed into fellowship with Christ and with his church just so we may be strengthened individually, but so that we may, in turn, bring strength, hope, and healing to our broken and hurting world. God's purpose in giving our lives cruciform shape—through fellowship with him and his church—is so we may extend the work of the cross to all people and all systems in our world in desperate need of the touch of his presence. This work is anything but easy. If we endeavor to combat the sufferings of the world—injustice and isolation, poverty and persecution, sin, disease and death—then it should come as no surprise that we often will share in the effects of these sufferings ourselves. As the Petersons communicated so gently yet with forceful

clarity, suffering comes with the territory of Christ's call to ministry. This call is not merely reserved for those with full-time vocational positions of missionary, evangelist, or pastor, but for everyone who follows Christ.

The apostle Paul makes this sobering reality clear in his letter to the Colossians. His intent was not to intimidate the Colossians or to scare them off, but to embolden them, and us, through the power of the Spirit to pick up the work that Christ has left for us to do. Christ's work is to be continued in the same manner in which it began. Christian work is inescapably cross work.

Paul lays out the target his ministry is aimed at in Colossians 1:28-29. "It is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me" (NRSV). The goal behind all of Paul's proclaiming, warning, and teaching, is that everyone—yes, everyone!—may be fully mature in Christ. This work of evangelism and discipleship wasn't all adrenaline and adventure for Paul, but toil and struggle. To toil is to be weary, to beat one's self out with hard labor. To struggle is to fight resiliently, like a competitor in the public games, where the stakes are often a matter of life or death.

In using this kind of markedly stern language, Paul makes no effort to hide just how arduous the labor of a Christian can be. Ministry doesn't happen easily. Serving Christ leaves scars. Loving others can throw our lives in disarray. Choosing to live on mission for Jesus means committing oneself to being willing to suffer. If we truly desire to know Christ, then we too will become intimately familiar with sufferings like his.

This reality is not only what Paul wants to warn the Colossians about, but what he invites them to enter into. A few verses earlier in the letter, he boldly states, "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering

for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). For many, this is one of the most perplexing statements in the entire New Testament. Is Paul really suggesting that Christ's finished work on the cross is somehow incomplete? Although at first glance it may appear that way, the answer is a definitive no. Christ's atoning sacrifice is fully sufficient for salvation, as Paul argued vigorously throughout his writings (see Romans 3:21-26; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21). What, then, does Paul mean?

Many commentators largely agree that the aspect of Christ's work that is "lacking," according to Paul, which he endeavors to "fill up in his flesh," is the *knowledge* of Christ's sufferings. In other words, Christ's sufferings in and of themselves were absolutely complete in their ability to forgive us from our sins and set us free for life with God forever. Yet, at the same time, the worldwide spread of this knowledge was far from finished. Paul is thus contending that while his sufferings are not *redemptive* in the sense that Christ's were, his hardships are *missionary* in nature. His sufferings complete what is "lacking" in Christ's afflictions in the sense that his ministry *extends* the knowledge and reality of the cross of Christ to the wider Gentile world.<sup>8</sup> Paul's sufferings, through the work of the Spirit, spread the knowledge and power of Christ's sufferings to those who have not yet heard or fully understood.

Earlier we quoted Peterson's translation of this passage, and it bears repeating for how well it captures both the sense and the invitation behind Paul's perplexing statement. "There's a lot of suffering to be entered into in this world—the kind of suffering Christ takes on. I welcome the chance to take my share in the church's part of that suffering. When I became a servant in this church, I experienced this suffering as a sheer gift, God's way of helping me serve you, laying out the whole truth" (Colossians 1:24-25 *The*

*Message*). Why did Paul “welcome the chance” to take part in the suffering Christ left the church to do? Because the suffering Paul experienced on behalf of the church enabled him to reveal “the whole truth” of the gospel to many people who had never heard it. Just as Paul entered into the “kind of suffering Christ takes on,” so we are called by God to do the same. As we do so, the potential to heal the world’s hurt with the love of Christ grows exponentially.

In his acclaimed work *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott boldly declares, “The greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die.”<sup>9</sup> We’ll unpack this bold thesis offered by Stott more fully in chapter nine, as we trace the history of how suffering has advanced the mission of God. Finally, in chapter ten, we’ll uncover how each of us can take our place and do our part to cultivate fellowship with the world as we raise the question, *Are you really passionate?* We’ll see that the world’s definition of *passion* is most often a far cry from the kind of passion Christ calls us to exhibit. Overall, we’ll begin to see that not only do we “know Christ” by “becoming like him in his death,” but we also *make Christ known* by living cross-shaped lives that *take on* and even *take in* the sufferings of our world.

## **Our Vision and Hope**

Throughout this book, we hope that you discover how *God’s kingdom has the potential to advance greatly as we strive to live as fully and faithfully as we possibly can, despite the unwelcome presence of suffering in our lives*. His kingdom advances in us in spiritually transformative ways as we experience fellowship with our suffering Savior. It advances through us as we share our lives with our broken and hurting neighbors and world. It advances between us to forge a fellowship of the suffering—the church—given by God to be poured out as an offering to our suffering world.

The reason we believe God's kingdom can be powerfully advanced through a fellowship of the suffering is because, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer contends, "within the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, *suffering is overcome by suffering*, and becomes the way to communion with God."<sup>10</sup> We believe he means that *the suffering caused by evil is overcome by the suffering inspired by cross-like love*. In other words, the suffering our human community experiences has the potential to be gradually healed through connection to a fellowship of sufferers who are experiencing healing through fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ, the suffering Servant. Thus, we are convinced that the more the church takes its rightful place as a fellowship of the suffering, the greater hope our suffering world has for redemption.

In chapters two and three, we'll share our stories of suffering and the imperfect attempts we've made to live as fully and faithfully as possible in the midst of these hardships. Our intent is not to put our lives on the pedestal of faithful suffering, but to invite all fellow sufferers into greater communion with Christ, his church, and the world.

### **The Fellowship of the Ring**

During the early stages of writing and researching this project, I (Dave) spent many evenings reading aloud *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy with my wife. I found myself so swept up in the plot of these treasured stories that throughout the day I often thought I was on assignment, alongside Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin, Legolas and Gimli (I'm sure Gimli would have protested the ordering of names here!), and Gandalf and Aragorn, to save Middle Earth. What particularly struck me in reading these stories was how their hardships became the vehicles that propelled them further and further toward their goal. If they tried to avoid experiencing pain, they'd risk compromising their entire mission.

Thus to destroy the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, they would have to leave behind their beloved homeland, sacrifice Middle Earthly comforts, resist alluring temptations, face their own fallenness, overcome their worst fears, traverse dangerous terrains, mourn the loss of trusted friends, fight battle after seemingly impossible battle, and risk their lives, only to have to risk them again and again. The only way this could be done was *together*. This group of unlikely compatriots was no mere “fellowship of the ring,” but a fellowship of the *suffer*-ing.

No matter how unsettling the prospect of the fellowship of the suffering may seem, just like the fellowship of the ring we serve too great of a mission, under too great of a Savior, not to put everything obediently on the line as well.

Jesus is worth it.

### **Forging Fellowship Reflections**

At the end of each chapter, you will find questions to reflect on personally and to discuss with others as a group. In offering these questions we hope that you and the people in your small group, church, or family will be able to take steps toward becoming more of a fellowship of the suffering together. Ask God to give you the courage, the grace, and the patience to be available, vulnerable, and present with one another—and the Spirit—in these conversations.

1. Elisabeth Elliot contends, “Suffering is having what you don’t want, or wanting what you don’t have.” How do you suffer? As much as you’re comfortable, consider sharing one thing you have that you don’t want or one thing you don’t have that you want.
2. Throughout this chapter the authors emphasized that suffering comes with the territory of following Christ. Describe a time when

your life was negatively impacted, or when you have experienced suffering for living as a follower of Christ.

3. The driving question of this book is, How can we learn to live as fully and faithfully as possible despite the unavoidable, unwelcome presence of suffering? How have you tried to live as fully and faithfully as possible despite the unwanted presence of suffering in your life (regardless of whether you were successful)?
4. The authors contend that the unexpected invitation of suffering is fellowship. Describe a time when the disappointments you experienced enabled you to draw closer to Christ and others.

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