

*The Fellowship of the Suffering:
How Hardship Shapes Us for
Ministry and Mission*
Available May 15, 2018
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978-0-8308-4530-9

Suffering Comes with the Territory

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.

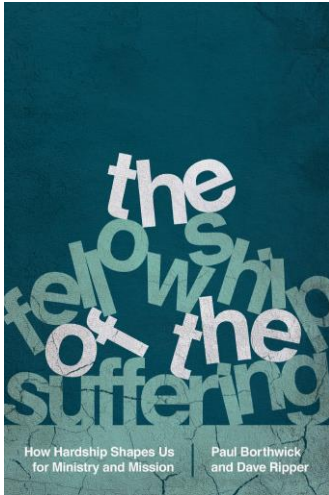
– Taken from chapter one, "Suffering Comes with the Territory"

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Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com
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Solidarity Through Suffering

When I (Paul) was told by my doctors that I had Type 1 diabetes, I knew it meant that (barring miraculous healing), I was looking at a lifetime regiment of daily blood tests, insulin shots and food control. We called our long-time friend Carolyn. She and her husband, Donald, had gone to university with me, and we had served our church's youth ministry together. I had performed their wedding. But above all, I called Carolyn because I knew that she had lived with Type 1 diabetes since she was eight years old. She'd know what we were going through. She made time to see us, explained everything from blood tests to low blood sugars to some what-to-expect predictions concerning why diabetics should probably not eat pizza! We were together with Carolyn and Donald in a fellowship of the suffering, and she was comforting us with the comfort she had received from God.

Several months after starting on the regiment of shots, tests, and a carbohydrate-managed diet, I saw Christie telling people about the challenges of managing the diabetes lifestyle. Referring to our "old life" versus our "new life," I overheard her say, "All that changed when *we* got diabetes." I almost broke into tears. She had willingly entered into solidarity with me – even though she didn't have the disease.

Speaking of Christie, I've watched her minister with compassion to people who have pain in their family relationships, because Christie is allowing God to use her pain to care for others. She's listened with compassionate understanding to one Christian brother as he described the pain of not being able to help his mentally ill child; Christie understands because she grew up with a mentally ill brother. She's empathized with a high school student who has just learned that her mother is an alcoholic; Christie was a teenager when she learned her mother was an alcoholic.

The basis of this book stems from this idea of fellowship in suffering. When I (Paul) first heard Dave preach, I could tell there was a depth in him that only suffering could have forged. Even though he was chronologically relatively young, he had the testimony of someone who knew the potential of an inescapable prison.

The couple we visited in Mozambique later experienced a devastating loss when their six-year-old daughter died from cerebral malaria. We thought they would return home overwhelmed by the loss. They persevered and stayed on to serve. When I inquired as to where they found the strength, they shared that when they buried their daughter, they were surrounded by four Mozambican pastors – all had also buried at least one of their own children.

Suffering forges solidarity with others like nothing else can. There is no community on earth like the fellowship of the suffering.

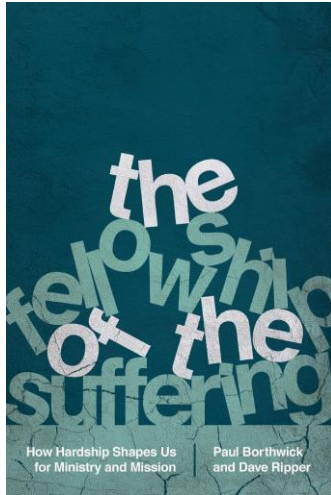
– Adapted from chapter seven, "It's Our Family: Solidarity Through Suffering"

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Missionary Paul Borthwick and pastor Dave Ripper show how transformation through our personal pain enables us to minister faithfully to a hurting world. They candidly share about their own struggles and how they have seen God's kingdom advance through hardship and suffering. Though we naturally avoid suffering, Christians throughout church history have become powerful witnesses to Christ as a result of their brokenness.

Could Aversion to Suffering Be the Greatest Inhibitor to Personal Growth?

The question of suffering is one of the most difficult to answer. Why did you decide to address it?

Paul Borthwick: Though none of us want suffering and hardship, we want people to know that these are normal aspects of the Christian life – illustrated by the life of Jesus, testified to in the Scriptures, and repeated through Christian history. *The Fellowship of the Suffering* establishes the direct link between our suffering and hardship with our personal growth as well as our participation in God's Great Commission. We want to help people understand the advancement of God's kingdom through suffering.

Describe the approach you take to suffering.

Paul: Suffering comes as such a surprise to most Christians, especially we Christians raised in the West. This surprise has emerged from our weak theology coupled with an American approach to life that says, pursue pleasure and avoid pain at all costs. This line of thinking is pervasive in the church and in our culture today, and is clearly counter to the message, mission, and example of Christ. Our aversion to suffering may be the greatest inhibitor to our personal growth as disciples and correspondingly to the growth of the church.

What do you want readers to learn about suffering?

Paul: We don't want to romanticize or simplify suffering, but we do want readers to understand that concepts such as suffering, hardship, tribulation, affliction, and more are a normative part of following Jesus Christ. With this in mind, we define suffering in a broad, accessible, and relatable way. Elisabeth Elliot defined suffering as "having what you don't want, or wanting what you don't have."

We want readers to know the significance and potential of suffering from both a personal and global perspective. Suffering not only transforms our faith and relationship with God individually, but has been a catalyst for the rapid spread of the gospel in the Majority World. Real-life stories will be provided from all over the world to make these principles concrete, memorable, and livable. In our communication, we write from the platform of fellow sufferers and learners in this topic, including our personal stories ranging from chronic diseases, to crushed dreams, to dysfunctional family life, and to personal losses along the way.

We hope to issue a prophetic call for every follower of Jesus to be willing to embrace the call

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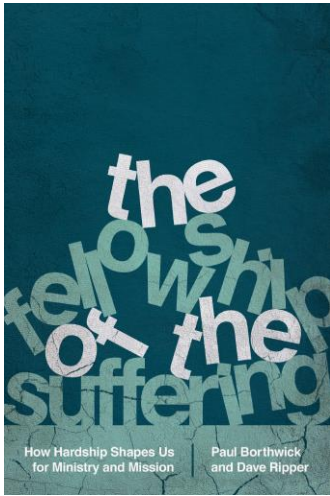


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to grow through difficulties, circumstances, and suffering that they might never choose for themselves but which present themselves as the realities of their lives.

We want to hear through our voices that these lessons are not easy but a commitment to grow through our struggles. We hope that we have provided an uncommon vantage point into this topic by blending the voices of a millennial (Dave, age 32) and boomer (Paul, age 63).

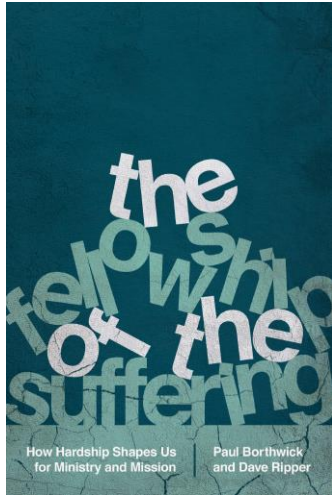
We aim to enlist the next generation of Christ-followers into this fellowship of the suffering according to Philippians 3:10.

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The Fellowship of the Suffering

"If you are like me, you tend to gloss over your suffering, thinking it unspiritual to dwell on it. The pain is like a friend whose visit you really do not want. Paul and Dave teach us the importance of sitting with this unwelcome friend, learning from him, and, in the end, being transformed. When we do, we find we have been with the Suffering Servant whose friendship graces us in the pain, bringing us what we did not expect: peace and joy."

— Scott Arbeiter, president, World Relief

"I've lost my husband to Alzheimer's and survived two bouts with cancer, so I read anything about suffering cautiously. The Fellowship of the Suffering has touched my heart and encouraged my spirit. While we all acknowledge the reality of suffering, we struggle to discover the why. Paul Borthwick and Dave Ripper, experienced sufferers, do not offer trite answers or slick formulas, but rather guide us to and through the how of the dark and disappointing days. There is great comfort from fellowship with others who are also walking through a season of suffering, deep wisdom in the words from those who really understand, and rich hope in the journey to the One who has suffered and invites us to join him on the mourning bench. This is a book that will not sit on my bookshelf but will be taken down again and again so I can draw from its refreshing and honest insight."

— Cynthia Fantasia, former pastor of women's ministries at Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA

"With the beauty of intergenerational friendship, Paul and Dave come alongside with inspiring Scripture and stories that authentically connect our collective experiences of suffering on this side to the hope we share in Christ for eternity. I have been reflecting on how God shapes praise out of our pain, and testimony out of testing times. . . . Here is an authentic, life-giving, practical companion to the life of 'sharing in the fellowship of His suffering.'"

— Nana Yaw Offei Awuku,
 director of the Lausanne
 Younger Leaders Generation

"Paul has jokingly said that this book will obviously not be a bestseller like one on health and wealth might be, but I think he's completely wrong. Suffering and brokenness are the common experiences to which all who live in this world can relate. As the authors share their stories, you will be drawn into their pain and find yourself saying, 'someone does understand.' The book contains wonderful gems such as, 'to choose faithfulness in the face of suffering is a process.' There are no simple answers or platitudes, but instead genuine, realistic thoughts that will help you find your way through the pain."

— Jane Overstreet, President and CEO, Development Associates International

"When I first broke my neck and landed in a wheelchair, I thought the Lord was being grossly unfair. I wondered, isn't God being too heavy-handed? Is this kind of suffering 'normal' in the normal Christian life? Those were honest questions, and I wasn't about to settle for anything less than honest answers. However, over the years the answers I found most satisfying and fulfilling weren't quite what I expected — but they more than sufficed! It's why I recommend this book. Paul Borthwick and Dave Ripper write not only from decades of hard study, but from the heartache of personal experience — thus their words carry weight. If you are looking for the right perspective when things go wrong — very wrong — then The Fellowship of the Suffering is a must-read. And you don't have to break your neck to grasp its wisdom."

— Joni Eareckson Tada, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

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