



GOD'S GRACE

*in your*

SUFFERING

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## INTRODUCTION

Job, his wife, and his three friends agreed on two things. Our lives are “few of days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1), and God’s hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. But strife and perplexity set in among them when they tried to explain exactly how God and troubles connect.

They argued about the cause of Job’s troubles; no one understood the backstory of cosmic drama. They argued about what God was up to; no one understood that God had purposes for good beyond human comprehension and he was not punishing Job. They argued about the validity of Job’s professed faith and faithfulness; no one understood that Job was both the genuine article and a work in progress. And they argued about *who* needed to do *what* in response to affliction; no one understood that the Lord would show up, that he would be asking the questions, that his purposes would be fulfilled. The Lord himself described Job as “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8). But who could have predicted the tumultuous journey that proved that fact?

Thousands of years later, we humankind are still short-lived

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and still much afflicted. And our troubles still perplex us. Why is this happening to me? Where is God? What is he doing? What does faith look like? How does the Lord show up? Why is the journey so tumultuous?

And what difference does it make that in between Job's afflictions back then and your afflictions right now, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us? Job said:

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see for myself,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25–27)

Job's Redeemer came to him at last. The Lord answered out of the whirlwind, and Job said, "Now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). But we see even more clearly. From where we stand, we see Jesus Christ. We see more of who the Redeemer is. We see more of how he did it. We say more than Job could say: "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). We see. But our lives are still "few of days and full of trouble."

Here is the central concern of the book before you. When you face trouble, loss, disability, and pain, *how* does the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ meet you and comfort you? How does grace and goodness find you, touch you, work with you, and walk with you through deep waters? You probably

already know something of the “right answer.” Consider three sweeping truths.

First, it is obvious from both Scripture and experience that God *never* establishes a no-fly zone keeping all problems away. He never promises that your life will be safe, easy, peaceful, healthy, and prosperous. On the contrary, you and I are certain to experience danger, hardship, turmoil, ill health, and loss. And some of God’s beloved children live lives particularly fraught with physical pain, poverty, isolation, betrayal, and loss. For all of us, death is the inevitable and impending final affliction. We humankind are mariposa lilies in Death Valley after rain. We flourish for a moment. Then the wind passes over us, and we are gone, and no trace remains. That’s the description of God’s blessed and beloved children according to Psalm 103:15–16. And, of course, people who are estranged from God also live brief and troubled lives. We cannot read God’s favor or disfavor by assessing how troubled a person’s life is.

Second, it is obvious from Scripture and experience that we also sample joys and good gifts from God’s hand. The mariposa lily is beautiful in its season. Most people taste something of what is good—familial care perhaps, and daily bread, occasional feasting, a measure of good health, friends and companions, moments of beauty, opportunity to become good at something, committed love, children’s laughter, a job well done, the innocent pleasure of resting after working, and perhaps a restful sleep. There are no guarantees of any particular earthly good, but all good gifts may be gratefully enjoyed.

Some people seem unusually blessed with temporal joys. Job enjoyed unusually good gifts at both the beginning and the end

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of his life—Satan had accused the Lord of giving Job a cushy life as a bribe for faith. And arrogant people, at odds with God and self-reliant, may also enjoy an easy life of good health, growing wealth, and the admiration of others. That’s how Psalm 73:3–12 describes people who flourish though they deem the Lord irrelevant. We cannot read God’s favor or disfavor by assessing how easy and trouble-free a person’s life is.

Third, it’s obvious from Scripture—and it can become deeply rooted in experience—that God speaks and acts through affliction. As C. S. Lewis says, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is to anchor your experience more deeply in God’s goodness. Suffering reveals the genuineness of faith in Christ. And suffering produces genuine faith. For example, when you struggle under affliction, the Psalms become real. True faith deepens, brightens, and grows wise. You grow up in knowing God. When you are the genuine article, you are also and always a work in progress.

Suffering is both the acid test and the catalyst. It reveals and forms faith. It also exposes and destroys counterfeit faith. Afflictions expose illusory hopes invested in imaginary gods. Such disillusionment is a good thing, a severe mercy. The destruction of what is false invites repentance and faith in God as he truly is. Suffering brings a foretaste of the loss of every good thing for those who profess no faith in the one Savior of the world, God’s inexpressible gift, the Lifegiver. Affliction presses on unbelief. It presses unbelief toward bitterness, or despair, or addiction, or ever more desperate illusions, or ever more deadly

self-satisfaction—or to a reconsideration of what lasts. To lose what you are living for, when those treasures are vanities, invites comprehensive repentance. We can read God’s favor or disfavor by noticing how a person responds to affliction.

God’s hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. Each day will bring you “its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34). Some difficulties are light and momentary—in your face today and forgotten tomorrow. Other hardships last for a season. Some troubles recur and abate cyclically. Other afflictions become chronic. Some woes steadily worsen, progressively bringing pain and disability into your life. And other sufferings arrive with inescapable finality—the death of a dream, the death of a loved one, your own dying and death. But whatever you must face changes in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise that you, too, will live. Faith can grow up. You can learn to say with all your heart, in company with a great cloud of witnesses: “We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:16–17). We can learn to say it and mean it, because it is true.

If you are someone who has taken the book of Psalms to heart, if you’ve pondered the second half of Romans 8, if you’ve worked your way through Job, if you’ve let 1 Peter sink in, then you’ve already got the gist of how God’s grace works in hardships. But there are always new challenges. The wisdom to suffer well is like manna—you must receive nourishment every day. You can’t store it up, though you do become more familiar with how to go out and find what you need for today.

How will God actually engage *your* sufferings with his grace? You may know the right answer in theory. You may have known it firsthand in some difficult situations. And yet you'll find that you don't know God well enough or in the exact ways you need to for the next thing that comes your way.

We take God's hard answer and make it sound like a pat answer. He sets about a long slow *answering*, but we're after a quick fix. His answer insists on being lived out over time and into the particulars. We act as if just saying the right words makes it so. God's answer involves changing you into a different kind of person. But we act as if some truth, principle, strategy, or perspective might simply be incorporated into who we already are. God personalizes his answer on hearts with an uncanny flexibility. But we turn it into a formula: "If you just believe x. If you just do y. If you just remember z." No important truth ever contains the word "just" in the punch line.

We can make the right answer sound old hat, but I guarantee this: God will surprise you. He will make you stop. You will struggle. He will bring you up short. You will hurt. He will take his time. You will grow in faith and in love. He will deeply delight you. You will find the process harder than you ever imagined—and better. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. At the end of the long road you will come home at last. No matter how many times you've heard it, no matter how long you've known it, no matter how well you can say it, God's answer will come to mean something better than you could ever imagine.

He answers with himself.<sup>2</sup>