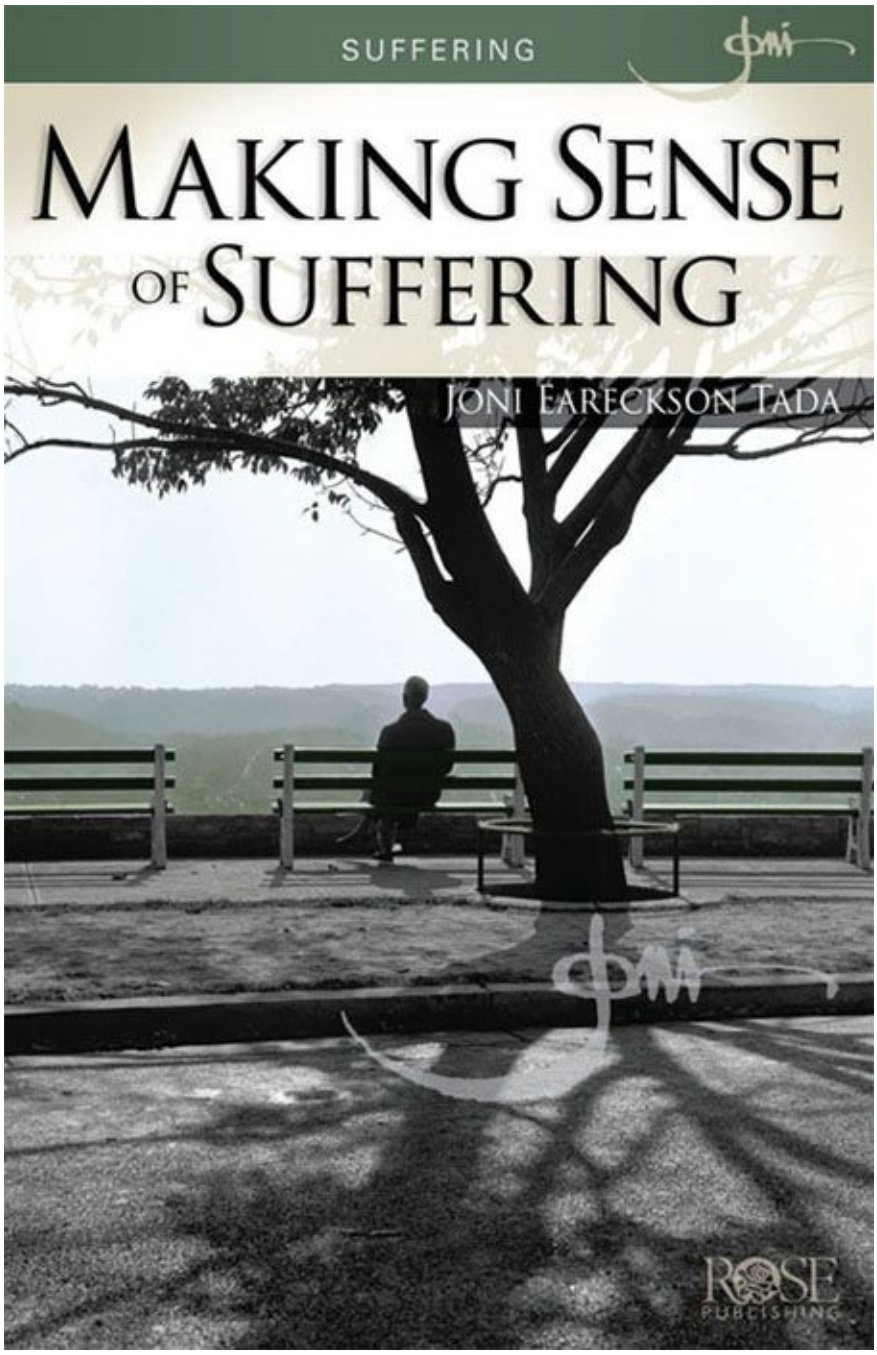
SUFFERING

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

JONI EARECKSON TADA



ROSE PUBLISHING


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THIS HANDY EBOOK:

- Brings comfort to those dealing with hardship by revealing 10 ways good can come out of suffering—**in less than 30 minutes.**
- Gives wisdom, tips, and insight from Joni Eareckson Tada, an international advocate for individuals with disabilities, a published author, a founder of a non-profit organization, and a quadriplegic who has learned how to trust in God in all circumstances.
- Offers hope to those wondering "Why do I have to suffer?" "How can I possibly survive this?" and "What good can come from my suffering?"

VIEW AS:

- Graphic Overview
- eBook Format

GRAPHIC OVERVIEW

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT SUFFERING



Why do I have to suffer?

How can I possibly endure this pain?

What good could possibly come from it?

Many who feel overwhelmed by pain or problems are driven to the Bible, believing that the answers to these questions are couched somewhere in its pages—but most people aren't sure where to begin their study. This survey of Scripture will give you a positive perspective on what God says about our afflictions.

Scripture is constantly telling us to view life from an eternal perspective. What is transitory, such as physical pain, will not endure, but what is lasting, such as the eternal weight of glory accrued from that pain, will remain forever. Everything else—numbing heartache, deep disappointment, circumstances completely out of our control—everything else, no matter how real it seems to us on earth, is said to be "light and momentary" compared with what our response is producing for us in heaven (2 Cor. 4:17).

This kind of nonchalance about gut-wrenching suffering used to drive me crazy. Stuck in a wheelchair I wondered, *Lord, how in the world can you consider my troubles light and momentary? I will never walk or run again. I will never use my hands... my back aches... I'm trapped! Maybe you see all of this achieving an eternal glory, but all I see is one awful day after the next of life in this stinking wheelchair!* My pain screamed for my undivided attention, making me anxious to find a quick fix or an escape hatch.



But somewhere after the first five years of life in my wheelchair, I noticed a change in my attitude toward hardships. I was beginning to see how my quadriplegia was working for my good and God's glory—simply put, it meant becoming more like Christ.

1

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- Suffering was forcing me to make decisions about following God—I was choosing him more often over my doubts and fears.
- Suffering was also doing a cleanup on my character—I was able to stick to promises, quit whining, not be sloppy with relationships, and be more patient. My thoughts were more pure—I couldn't reach for the common temptations that used to entice me (having no hands helped).
- Suffering was making me more sensitive to others—before my accident, I didn't care much about people in wheelchairs, but now it was a different story.
- I realized that being paralyzed was making heaven come alive—not in a cop-out way, but in a way that made me want to live better here on earth because greater things were coming in the next life.

In short, I was beginning to make sense of my suffering.

Now, many years later, I am more sure than ever that when it comes to our afflictions, God's got his reasons. Good ones. I realize that a list of reasons can sound dry and technical, but years ago, understanding the spiritual benefits behind my suffering helped answer—at least in part—that sticky question, "Why does God allow so much hardship in my life?" This pamphlet will help you explore the reasons God has for your hardship.



After a 1967 diving accident left Joni Eareckson Tada a spinal cord-injured quadriplegic, she embarked on a lifelong study to make sense of suffering from God's perspective. Joni gleaned many helpful insights from God's Word that helped her find peace in the midst of permanent paralysis and pain. These pages reveal some of those insights.

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God's Role in Suffering

Suffering involves having what you do not want, and wanting what you do not have. How we deal with suffering is strongly linked to our perspective on God and our attitude about his dealings in our lives.

Affliction itself is like a fire, having great potential for both good and bad: the same flame that cooks a steak can also ruin acres of precious forest within minutes. So it is with suffering. While in one person, suffering can mold a Christlike character, in another it has a tendency to breed self-centeredness and anger. The fruit that suffering yields in our lives depends on perspective and attitude that must be shaped by the Word of God.

God is sovereign—that is, he possesses ultimate power—and he is able to work out even bad things to accomplish good for us and glory for himself. God's relationship to suffering is somewhat mysterious, but we know for certain that he is able to steer calamities to serve his good purposes. The following verses remind me that God is in control and has every intention to make our lives reflect his glory.

Isaiah 45:5–7: I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

Romans 8:28: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.



Ephesians 1:11–13: In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

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SCRIPTURES ON GOD'S PURPOSE IN OUR PAIN

Discovering God's hand in hardship is really a discovery of God's Word. Take a close look at the following verses to understand a few of the benefits that can come through pain and problems. Perhaps these power-packed verses will be a lens through which you gain a clearer perspective on your own afflictions.

SUFFERING AND MY RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

Afflictions increase my awareness of God's sustaining power. God is the one who upholds me through my afflictions. Realizing this gives me a deeper appreciation for his grace and power that sustain.

Psalm 68:19: Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

Suffering bankrupts me, making me dependent on God. When afflictions overwhelm me, I look to our powerful God who can provide stability and balance.

2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Through suffering, my spirit is broken; I am humbled and emptied. God pours out his healing and help on those whose hearts are broken and submissive.

Psalm 51:17: The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Suffering leads me to discernment and knowledge; it drives me to God's statutes. My obedience in hardship helps me see things from God's point of view.

Psalm 119:66–67, 71: Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

The weaker I am, the harder I must lean on God's grace; the harder I lean on him, the stronger I discover him to be, and the bolder my testimony to his grace.

2 Timothy 1:7–8: For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the Gospel, by the power of God.

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Suffering and My Relationship to Christ

Suffering helps me to learn the mind of Christ. Since Jesus "learned obedience through the things he suffered," I begin to have his perspective when I, too, obey God in hardships.

Philippians 2:5–7: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

Suffering opens the way for me to participate and share in Christ's suffering. This is one way Jesus invites us to know him on a more intimate level. To suffer hardship while keeping our eyes open to God's glory identifies us with our Savior on a very personal level.

1 Peter 4:12–13: Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

2 Corinthians 1:5: For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Suffering allows the life of Christ to show up in mine. Suffering causes me to die to myself, including my wants and wishes, thereby allowing the life of Christ to be revealed through me.

2 Corinthians 4:10–11: We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Suffering teaches me that God is more concerned with my character than my comfort. God will use my outward circumstances to cultivate inward character qualities.

Romans 5:3–4: We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.



Hebrews 12:10–11: Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

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Suffering and My Sin

Suffering is one of God's tools to uproot sin in my life. Like the process of purifying gold, God turns up the heat of affliction, causing all the dross and impurities in my life to rise to the surface. Once impurities are revealed, they are more easily identified and removed.

1 Corinthians 3:12–13: If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

Job 23:10: But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.



Suffering is the tool God has chosen to bring about obedience in my life.

Philippians 3:10: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Hebrews 5:8: Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

James 1:2–4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Psalm 119:67: Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

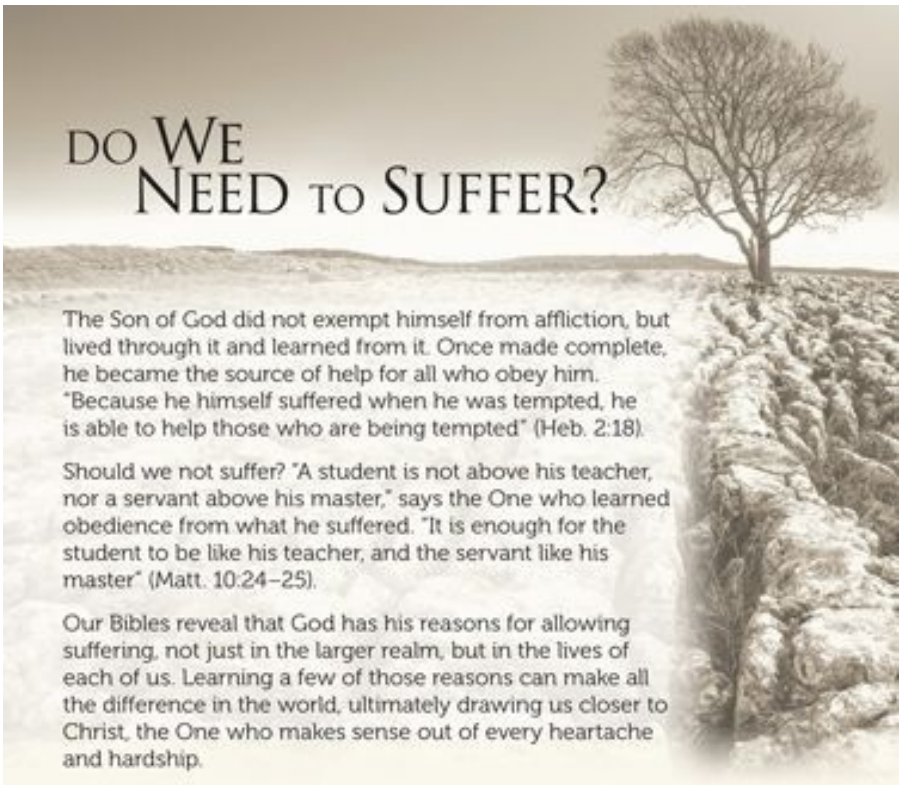
God uses suffering to refine and perfect my faith, and strengthen my Christian character. It also serves as a "deterrent" when I feel like rebelling against God—I realize sinning would only pile on more problems.

Psalm 66:8–9: Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

1 Peter 5:10: And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 1:6–7: In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

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DO WE NEED TO SUFFER?

The Son of God did not exempt himself from affliction, but lived through it and learned from it. Once made complete, he became the source of help for all who obey him. "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18).

Should we not suffer? "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master," says the One who learned obedience from what he suffered. "It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matt. 10:24–25).

Our Bibles reveal that God has his reasons for allowing suffering, not just in the larger realm, but in the lives of each of us. Learning a few of those reasons can make all the difference in the world, ultimately drawing us closer to Christ, the One who makes sense out of every heartache and hardship.



Joni Eareckson Tada, the founder and chief executive officer of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, is an international advocate for people with disabilities. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni Eareckson, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. After two years of rehabilitation, she emerged with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations. She founded Joni and Friends in 1979 to provide Christ-centered programs to special needs families, as well as training to churches. Through the organization's ***Christian Institute on Disability,*** Joni and her team have helped develop disability ministry courses of study in major Christian universities and seminaries. Visit us at www.joniandfriends.org.

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Suffering and My Faith

Suffering increases my faith. Faith is like a muscle that is strengthened when put to the test. If there is never an opportunity for faith to be proved, it will not grow. Suffering provides the gym equipment on which my faith can be exercised.

Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Suffering teaches me that the greatest good of the Christian life is not the absence of pain, but the growth of Christlikeness. To be like Christ in suffering is to be prayerful, obedient to the Father, self-controlled, hopeful, patient, and longsuffering.

2 Corinthians 4:10: We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Romans 8:28: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

God desires truth in my innermost being, and one way he achieves it is through my suffering. Affliction can serve as a sieve, stripping away the unnecessary from what is necessary in my life. Suffering forces me to recognize the truth about myself and my situation.

Psalm 51:6: Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Psalm 119:17: Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word.

Suffering teaches me to give thanks in times of sorrow. Hardships are God's way of teaching me how to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

1 Thessalonians 5:18: Give thanks in all circumstances.

2 Corinthians 1:11: Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Psalm 42:11: Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.



We aren't always responsible for the circumstances in which we find ourselves. However, we are responsible for the way we respond to them.

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SUFFERING AND MY RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

Suffering forces community and the use of gifts for the common good. Ideally, suffering brings families and friends—even a church—together. When someone is going through hardship, it gives an opportunity for others to exercise their gifts in a supportive way.

Philippians 4:12–14: I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Suffering binds Christians together in a common or joint purpose. Like the *esprit de corps* between soldiers, afflictions can strengthen the bonds of friendship and forge hearts together in a common cause.

Revelation 1:9: I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Sometimes suffering is necessary to win the lost. My godly response to pain and problems can serve as an instrument to lead others to the Lord.

2 Timothy 2:8–10: Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

2 Timothy 4:5–6: But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.

Suffering allows me to comfort and strengthen others who are facing trials. As I experience comfort in the midst of my problems, I am able to then extend empathy and understanding to those who are struggling with grief or loss.

2 Corinthians 1:3–5: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

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SUFFERING AND HEAVEN

Endurance of suffering will be rewarded. To endure hardship obediently enriches my eternal estate, increasing my capacity for joy, worship, and service in heaven.

2 Corinthians 4:17: For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Afflictions test where my real point of hope is. Trials can make my hope more certain—my response to tribulation forces me to reflect on the real meaning of life and align my core values with Christ's.

1 Peter 1:6, 13: In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.... Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Suffering helps me to see how small and insignificant worldly attractions are compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Philippians 3:8: What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Equity for suffering will be found in the next life. There may be no justice or restitution in this life for the things we suffer because of wicked people, but in heaven, justice will be served. Bible verses like the following may seem harsh, but consider the Nazi concentration camp... the brothel where little girls are forced into sex slavery... the genocides in Armenia and Ukraine. True, we should pray for the wicked who perpetrate these awful things, but if they refuse to repent, they expose themselves to God's judgment. Thank God he takes up the cause of the innocent; if not, there would be no justice.

Psalm 58:10–11: The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth."

Suffering stretches our hope. Hope is the confident assurance in God's promises and his ultimate victory over sin and suffering.

Job 13:14–15: Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.

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THE POWER OF EXAMPLE



Many believers facing serious hardships feel so overwhelmed. They need the power of example. They need to see someone experiencing greater conflict than they are facing, yet still trusting in the Lord.

Hebrews 6:12 says, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."

If people are floundering in their faith or infected by a spirit of complaint; if they are worn out like the battle-weary believers mentioned in Hebrews 6, they need to see that God's power works, not just in theory, but actually in someone's life. Our courage can breed courage in others. God wants us to be a good example to others who are observing us.

WE ARE GOD'S BILLBOARDS

Colossians 1:24 says, "'Now I rejoice in what was suffered 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.'" Nothing is lacking when it comes to what Christ did on the cross. It is finished, just as he said. But something **is** lacking when it comes to showcasing the salvation story to others. Although Jesus is no longer here in the flesh to demonstrate what a godly response to suffering looks like, you and I are.

When we suffer and handle it with grace, we're like walking billboards advertising the positive way God works in the life of someone who suffers. It's for the benefit of believers. But it's more than a matter of example, or even inspiration. Because we are one in the body of Christ, we are linked together. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7). The purpose of life is to live for God and others. Jesus showed us that.



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TELL ME YOUR SECRET

Please tell me your secret; I want to sit at your feet.
I need to know how you handle the pain that is your daily meat.
How do you keep on smiling when each day your health grows worse?
How do you keep depending on God when you're living with a curse?

Every time I see her, her smile comes from deep within.
I know her fellowship with God isn't scarred by the chair she's in.
She admits her health is failing; she knows she's fading away.
How can she remain so calm when I'd be running away?

My friend, can you tell me how you can trust the Lord—
How can you stay so gentle and sweet when he seems to wield a sword?
You are to me a promise that even in the midst of pain
God is near and faithful if I will turn to Him again.

—Liz Hupp

My friend Liz wrote this poem after a quiet, unassuming woman in a wheelchair who attended her church passed away. For years, Liz had watched her from another pew, drawing strength from this woman's soft and submissive spirit—yet she never took the opportunity to tell her. This poem is Liz's attempt to put in writing what she so wished she would have said to this Christian who inspired her!

REFLECTION

- Why are we naturally not inclined to trust God in the midst of our hardships?
- When it comes to affliction, in what ways has God already proved his trustworthiness to us?
- How has your recent attitude toward pain and problems impacted others?
- Colossians 1:24 speaks about responding well to hardship "for the sake of...the church." How strong is your sense of responsibility to other believers?

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YOUR ETERNAL GAIN



Consider the example of Paul in Philippians 1. In his suffering, he felt torn: Was it better to depart and be with Christ, or to remain? After he acknowledged it was more necessary that he remain in order to strengthen and encourage others, he added: "I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me" (Phil. 1:25–26).

Notice those words "on account of me." If other people were encouraged by Paul's example, those spiritual victories were linked right back to Paul. In the same way, what others gain from observing your example gets credited to your eternal account.

The Lord of the universe notices when you sow seeds of courage in the lives of others, and every time you water the seed with your prayers. If something good stirs in a soul, even in the souls of those you do not know, God chalks it up to your account. You profit spiritually when he observes faith flowering and fruit ripening in the life of someone in whom you have invested your example. If others profit spiritually, you gain. If they are rewarded, you reap. If they are lifted up, you are raised with them. You share in the blue ribbon for the fruit borne in their lives. This is why the apostle Paul spoke of those in whom he invested his life as his "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). Other people are our crown!

Dear Lord Jesus, help me to be a good steward of the influence you've given me with my family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Help me to understand that my life is on display and that others are observing closely to see how I respond to tough trials. Enable me to live my life mindful that I am always an example to others—I am either nudging them closer to you through my obedience, or I am pushing them away from you with my complaining spirit. Help me to live responsibly in front of others for their benefit and for your glory! Amen!

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This kind of nonchalance about gut-wrenching suffering used to drive me crazy. Stuck in a wheelchair I wondered, *Lord, how in the world can you consider my troubles light and momentary? I will never walk or run again.*

I will never use my hands... my back aches... I'm trapped! Maybe you see all of this achieving an eternal glory, but all I see is one awful day after the next of life in this stinking wheelchair! My pain screamed for my undivided attention, making me anxious to find a quick fix or an escape hatch.

But somewhere after the first five years of life in my wheelchair, I noticed a change in my attitude toward hardships. I was beginning to see how my quadriplegia was working for my good and God's glory—simply put, it meant becoming more like Christ.

- Suffering was forcing me to make decisions about following God—I was choosing him more often over my doubts and fears.

- Suffering was also doing a cleanup on my character—I was able to stick to promises, quit whining, not be sloppy with relationships, and be more patient. My thoughts were more pure—I couldn't reach for the common temptations that used to entice me (having no hands helped).

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Suffering involves having what you do not want, and wanting what you do not have. How we deal with suffering is strongly linked to our perspective on God and our attitude about his dealings in our lives.

Affliction itself is like a fire, having great potential for both good and bad: the same flame that cooks a steak can also ruin acres of precious forest within minutes. So it is with suffering. While in one person, suffering can mold a Christlike character, in another it has a tendency to breed self-centeredness and anger. The fruit that suffering yields in our lives depends on perspective and attitude that must be shaped by the Word of God.

God is sovereign—that is, he possesses ultimate power—and he is able to work out even bad things to accomplish good for us and glory for himself. God's relationship to suffering is somewhat mysterious, but we know for certain that he is able to steer calamities to serve his good purposes. The following verses remind me that God is in control and has every intention to make our lives reflect his glory.



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Isaiah 45:5–7: I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me

there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.

Romans 8:28: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Ephesians 1:11–13: In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

Scriptures on God's Purpose in Our Pain

Discovering God's hand in hardship is really a discovery of God's Word. Take a close look at the following verses to understand a few of the benefits that can come through pain and problems. Perhaps these power-packed verses will be a lens through which you gain a clearer perspective on your own afflictions.

Suffering and My Relationship to God

Afflictions increase my awareness of God's sustaining power. God is the one who upholds me through my afflictions. Realizing this gives me a deeper appreciation for his grace and power that sustain.

> **Psalm 68:19:** Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

Suffering bankrupts me, making me dependent on God. When afflictions overwhelm me, I look to our powerful God who can provide stability and balance.

> **2 Corinthians 12:9:** "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Through suffering, my spirit is broken; I am humbled and emptied. God pours out his healing and help on those whose hearts are broken and submissive.

> **Psalm 51:17:** The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Suffering leads me to discernment and knowledge; it drives me to God's statutes. My obedience in hardship helps me see things from God's point of view.

> **Psalm 119:66–67, 71:** Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now

> I obey your word.... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

The weaker I am, the harder I must lean on God's grace; the harder I lean on him, the stronger I discover him to be, and the bolder my testimony to his grace.

> **2 Timothy 1:7–8:** For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the Gospel, by the power of God.

Suffering and My Relationship to Christ

Suffering helps me to learn the mind of Christ. Since Jesus "learned obedience through the things he suffered," I begin to have his perspective when I, too, obey God in hardships.

> **Philippians 2: 5–7:** Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

Suffering opens the way for me to participate and share in Christ's suffering. This is one way Jesus invites us to know him on a more intimate level. To suffer hardship while keeping our eyes open to God's glory identifies us with our Savior on a very personal level.

> **1 Peter 4:12–13:** Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

> **2 Corinthians 1:5:** For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Suffering allows the life of Christ to show up in mine. Suffering causes me to die to myself, including my wants and wishes, thereby allowing the life of Christ to be revealed through me.

> **2 Corinthians 4:10–11:** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Suffering teaches me that God is more concerned with my character than my comfort. God will use my outward circumstances to cultivate inward character qualities.

> **Romans 5:3–4:** We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

> **Hebrews 12:10–11:** Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.



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Suffering and My Sin

Suffering is one of God's tools to uproot sin in my life. Like the process of purifying gold, God turns up the heat of affliction, causing all the dross and impurities in my life to rise to the surface. Once impurities are revealed, they are more easily identified and removed.

> **1 Corinthians 3:12–13:** If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown

for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

Job 23:10: But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

Suffering is the tool God has chosen to bring about obedience in my life.

Philippians 3:10: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Hebrews 5:8: Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

James 1:2–4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Psalm 119:67: Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

God uses suffering to refine and perfect my faith, and strengthen my Christian character. It also serves as a "deterrent" when I feel like rebelling against God—I realize sinning would only pile on more problems.

Psalm 66:8–9: Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

1 Peter 5:10: And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 1:6–7: In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.



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Suffering and My Faith

Suffering increases my faith. Faith is like a muscle that is strengthened when put to the test. If there is never an opportunity for faith to be proved, it will not grow. Suffering provides the gym equipment on which my faith can be exercised.

> **Jeremiah 29:11:** "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Suffering teaches me that the greatest good of the Christian life is not the absence of pain, but the growth of Christlikeness. To be like Christ in suffering is to be prayerful, obedient to the Father, self-controlled, hopeful, patient, and longsuffering.

> **2 Corinthians 4:10:** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

> **Romans 8:28:** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

God desires truth in my innermost being, and one way he achieves it is through my suffering. Affliction can serve as a sieve, stripping away the unnecessary from what is necessary in my life. Suffering forces me to recognize the truth about myself and my situation.

> **Psalm 51:6:** Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me

wisdom in the inmost place.

Psalm 119:17: Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word.

Suffering teaches me to give thanks in times of sorrow. Hardships are God's way of teaching me how to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

1 Thessalonians 5:18: Give thanks in all circumstances.

2 Corinthians 1:11: Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Psalm 42:11: Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.



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We aren't always responsible for the circumstances in which we find ourselves. However, we are responsible for the way we respond to them.

Suffering and My Relationship to Others

Suffering forces community and the use of gifts for the common good. Ideally, suffering brings families and friends—even a church—together. When someone is going through hardship, it gives an opportunity for others to exercise their gifts in a supportive way.

> **Philippians 4:12–14:** I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Suffering binds Christians together in a common or joint purpose. Like the *esprit de corps* between soldiers, afflictions can strengthen the bonds of friendship and forge hearts together in a common cause.

> **Revelation 1:9:** I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Sometimes suffering is necessary to win the lost. My godly response to pain and problems can serve as an instrument to lead others to the Lord.

> **2 Timothy 2:8–10:** Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.
>
> **2 Timothy 4:5–6:** But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.

Suffering allows me to comfort and strengthen others who are facing trials. As I experience comfort in the midst of my problems, I am able to then extend empathy and understanding to those who are struggling with grief or loss.

> **2 Corinthians 1:3–5:** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through

> Christ our comfort overflows.

SUFFERING AND HEAVEN

Endurance of suffering will be rewarded. To endure hardship obediently enriches my eternal estate, increasing my capacity for joy, worship, and service in heaven.

> **2 Corinthians 4:17:** For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Afflictions test where my real point of hope is. Trials can make my hope more certain—my response to tribulation forces me to reflect on the real meaning of life and align my core values with Christ's.

> **1 Peter 1:6, 13:** In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.... Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Suffering helps me to see how small and insignificant worldly attractions are compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

> **Philippians 3:8:** What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Equity for suffering will be found in the next life. There may be no justice or restitution in this life for the things we suffer because of wicked people, but in heaven, justice will be served. Bible verses like the following may seem harsh, but consider the Nazi concentration camp... the brothel where little girls are forced into sex slavery... the genocides in Armenia and Ukraine. True, we should pray for the wicked who perpetrate these awful things, but if they refuse to repent, they expose themselves to God's judgment. Thank God he takes up the cause of the innocent; if not, there would be no justice.

> **Psalm 58:10–11:** The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,

> when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth."

Suffering stretches our hope. Hope is the confident assurance in God's promises and his ultimate victory over sin and suffering.

> **Job 13:14–15:** Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.

THE POWER OF EXAMPLE

Many believers facing serious hardships feel so overwhelmed. They need the power of example. They need to see someone experiencing greater conflict than they are facing, yet still trusting in the Lord.

Hebrews 6:12 says, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."

If people are floundering in their faith or infected by a spirit of complaint; if they are worn out like the battle-weary believers mentioned in Hebrews 6, they need to see that God's power works, not just in theory, but actually in someone's life. Our courage can breed courage in others. God wants us to be a good example to others who are observing us.



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We are God's Billboards

Colossians 1:24 says, "'Now I rejoice in what was suffered 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.'" Nothing is lacking when it comes to what Christ did on the cross. It is finished, just as he said. But something **is** lacking when it comes to showcasing the salvation story to others. Although Jesus is no longer here in the flesh to demonstrate what a godly response to suffering looks like, you and I are.

When we suffer and handle it with grace, we're like walking billboards advertising the positive way God works in the life of someone who suffers. It's for the benefit of believers. But it's more than a matter of example, or even inspiration. Because we are one in the body of Christ, we are linked together. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7). The purpose of life is to live for God and others. Jesus showed us that.



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TELL ME YOUR SECRET

Please tell me your secret; I want to sit at your feet.
I need to know how you handle the pain that is your daily meat.
How do you keep on smiling when each day your health grows worse?
How do you keep depending on God when you're living with a curse?

Every time I see her; her smile comes from deep within.
I know her fellowship with God isn't scarred by the chair she's in.
She admits her health is failing; she knows she's fading away.
How can she remain so calm when I'd be running away?

My friend, can you tell me how you can trust the Lord—
How can you stay so gentle and sweet when he seems to wield a sword?
You are to me a promise that even in the midst of pain
God is near and faithful if I will turn to Him again.

—Liz Hupp

My friend Liz wrote this poem after a quiet, unassuming woman in a wheelchair who attended her church passed away. For years, Liz had watched her from another pew, drawing strength from this woman's soft and submissive spirit—yet she never took the opportunity to tell her. This poem is Liz's attempt to put in writing what she so wished she would have said to this Christian who inspired her!

reFLECTION

- Why are we naturally not inclined to trust God in the midst of our hardships?
- When it comes to affliction, in what ways has God already proved his trustworthiness to us?
- How has your recent attitude toward pain and problems impacted others?
- Colossians 1:24 speaks about responding well to hardship "for the sake of...the church." How strong is your sense of responsibility to other believers?

YOUR ETERNAL GAIN

Consider the example of Paul in Philippians 1. In his suffering, he felt torn: Was it better to depart and be with Christ, or to remain? After he acknowledged it was more necessary that he remain in order to strengthen and encourage others, he added: "I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me" (Phil. 1:25–26).

Notice those words "on account of me." If other people were encouraged by Paul's example, those spiritual victories were linked right back to Paul. In the same way, what others gain from observing your example gets credited to your eternal account.



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The Lord of the universe notices when you sow seeds of courage in the lives of others, and every time you water the seed with your prayers. If something good stirs in a soul, even in the souls of those you do not know, God chalks it up to your account. You profit spiritually when he observes faith flowering and fruit ripening in the life of someone in whom you have invested your example. If others profit spiritually, you gain. If they are rewarded, you reap. If they are lifted up, you are raised with

them. You share in the blue ribbon for the fruit borne in their lives. This is why the apostle Paul spoke of those in whom he invested his life as his "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). Other people are our crown!

Dear Lord Jesus, help me to be a good steward of the influence you've given me with my family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Help me to understand that my life is on display and that others are observing closely to see how I respond to tough trials. Enable me to live my life mindful that I am always an example to others—I am either nudging them closer to you through my obedience, or I am pushing them away from you with my complaining spirit. Help me to live responsibly in front of others for their benefit and for your glory! Amen!

DO WE NEED TO SUFFER?

The Son of God did not exempt himself from affliction, but lived through it and learned from it. Once made complete, he became the source of help for all who obey him. "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18).

Should we not suffer? "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master," says the One who learned obedience from what he suffered. "It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matt. 10:24–25).

Our Bibles reveal that God has his reasons for allowing suffering, not just in the larger realm, but in the lives of each of us. Learning a few of those reasons can make all the difference in the world, ultimately drawing us closer to Christ, the One who makes sense out of every heartache and hardship.



Joni Eareckson Tada, the founder and chief executive officer of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, is an international advocate for people with disabilities. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni Eareckson, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. After two years of rehabilitation, she emerged with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations. She founded Joni and Friends in 1979 to provide Christ-centered programs to special needs families, as well as training to churches. Through the organization's ***Christian Institute on Disability***, Joni and her team have helped develop disability ministry courses of study in major Christian universities and seminaries. Visit us at www.joniandfriends.org.

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