

# The High Calling

a bimonthly publication of The Francis Asbury Society

## Marah: The Bitter Place

By Stan Key

When God redeemed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and led them on the journey that would take them to the Promised Land, he did not permit them to take the easiest and most direct path. He led them instead “by the desert road toward the Red Sea” (Ex. 13:18 NIV). Rather than following the most obvious route, he took them on a much lengthier path that led them into one of the most desolate pieces of real estate on Planet Earth: the Sinai Peninsula. Lest they question who was responsible for leading them into such a hostile desert environment, God gave them a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to reassure them that they were precisely where he wanted them to be.

The first stop on their journey to Canaan was Marah, the bitter place (Ex. 15:22–27). They hadn’t taken a wrong



turn, and God wasn’t punishing them for some sin. The pillar of fire had clearly led them to this painful place. But why? Why under heaven would a loving God lead his redeemed people to a bitter place like this? Scripture tells us the answer: God brought them to Marah “to put them to the test” (Ex. 15:25).

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## The Gift Nobody Wants

By Paul Brand (1914–2003)



A world-renowned hand surgeon and leprosy specialist, Dr. Paul Brand served for years as a medical missionary to India. It was as he lived and worked among the pain-afflicted that he began to discover the blessings that come through pain. This article is from his book (written with Philip Yancey) *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). It is an excerpt from Chapter 13 (“Beloved Enemy,” p. 179–97) and Chapter 18 (“Pleasure and Pain,” p. 288–309).

I must confess that I sometimes question my crusade to improve the image of pain. In a society that routinely portrays pain as the enemy, will anyone listen to a contrarian message extolling its virtues? Pain truly is the gift nobody wants. I can think of nothing more precious for those who suffer from congenital painlessness, leprosy, diabetes, and other nerve disorders. But people who already own this gift rarely value it. Usually, they resent it.

My esteem for pain runs so counter to the common attitude that I sometimes feel like a subversive, especially in modern Western countries. On my travels I have observed an ironic law of reversal at work: as a society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability

to cope with what suffering remains. (It is the philosophers, theologians, and writers of the affluent West, not the Third World, who worry obsessively about “the problem of pain,” and point an accusing finger at God.)

Certainly, the “less advanced” societies do not fear physical pain as much. I have watched Ethiopians sit calmly, with no anesthetic, as a dentist works his forceps back and forth around a decaying tooth. Women in Africa often deliver their babies without the use of drugs and with no sign of fear or anxiety. These traditional cultures may lack modern analgesics, but the beliefs and family support systems built into everyday life help equip individuals to cope with pain.

[In the modern West,] pain is an enemy, a sinister invader that must be expelled. This approach has a crucial, dangerous flaw: once regarded as an enemy, not a warning signal, pain loses its power to instruct. Silencing pain without considering its message is like disconnecting a ringing fire alarm to avoid receiving bad news.

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# The Hill of Difficulty

By John Bunyan (1628–1688)



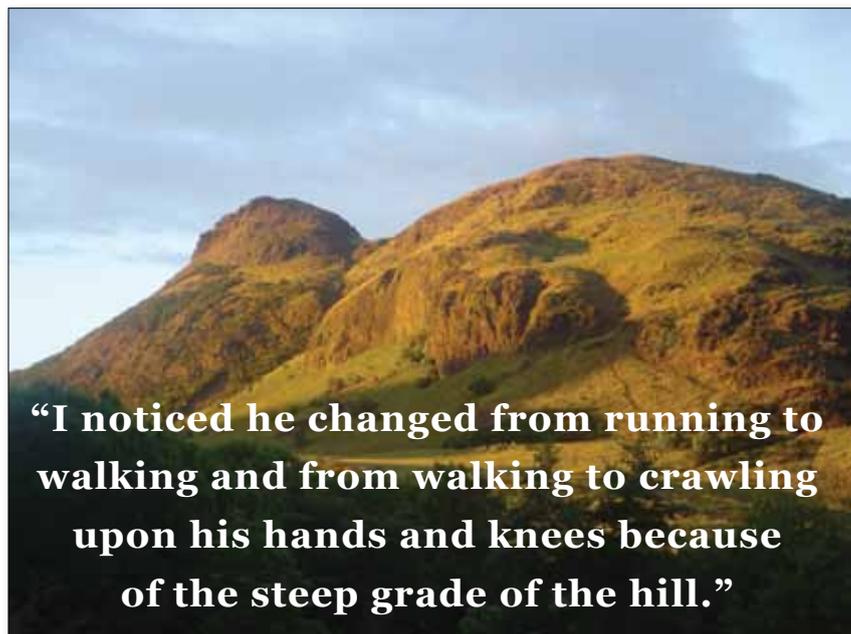
In his classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan describes the journey of a pilgrim named Christian as he travels from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Following the narrow path that leads to glory, he encounters many bitter experiences, but one of the most memorable is when he must climb the Hill of Difficulty. There is simply no other path that leads to the Celestial City than this steep climb marked by pain and

suffering. The following excerpt is taken from a modern English version of this classic of the Christian devotion (*The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*. Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1998. p. 53–62).

**I** then saw that they all went on until they came to the foot of the hill called Difficulty. At the bottom of the hill was a spring, and two other paths were there at that place besides the one that came straight from the Gate. There at the bottom of the hill one path turned to the left hand and the other to the right; but the narrow pathway led right up the hill. Christian then went to the spring and drank from it to refresh himself, and after which he began to go up the hill, saying:

*This hill, though high, I covet to ascend,  
The Difficulty will not me offend.  
For I perceive the Way to Life lies here:  
Come pluck up, Heart; let's neither faint nor fear;  
Better, though difficult, the Right Way to go,  
Than Wrong, though easy, where the End is Woe.*

Formality and Hypocrisy also came to the foot of the hill, but when they saw the hill was steep and high and that there were two other ways to go (and also supposing these two paths might meet again on the other side of the hill with the one Christian had taken) they decided to travel those roads. Now the name of one of those paths was Danger, and the name of the other one was Destruction. So one took the way called Danger, which led him into a great forest. The other walked directly up the Way



to Destruction, which led him into a wide area full of dark mountains where he stumbled and fell and arose no more.

Then I looked after Christian to watch him climb the hill. As he went, I noticed he changed from running to walking and from walking to crawling upon his hands and knees because of the steep grade of the hill. Now about halfway to the top of the hill there was a pleasant arbor, which had been made by the Lord of the Hill for the refreshment of weary travelers. When Christian arrived there, he sat down to rest himself. He then pulled his Document (a sealed scroll that guaranteed his inheritance) out of his coat and comforted himself by reading it. He also began again to examine the coat that had been given to him as he stood by the Cross. Pleasing himself in that way for a while, he finally began dozing and then fell fast asleep. His sleep detained him in that place until it was almost night, and in his sleep the Document fell out of his hand.

As he was sleeping, an individual approached him and woke him up, saying, “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” And with that, Christian suddenly jumped up and ran quickly on his way. He continued that pace until he came to the top of the hill.

When he arrived at the top of the hill, two men came running toward him from the opposite direction. The name of one was Fearful, and the other’s name was Mistrust. Christian addressed them and said, “Sirs, what’s the matter? You’re running the wrong way.”

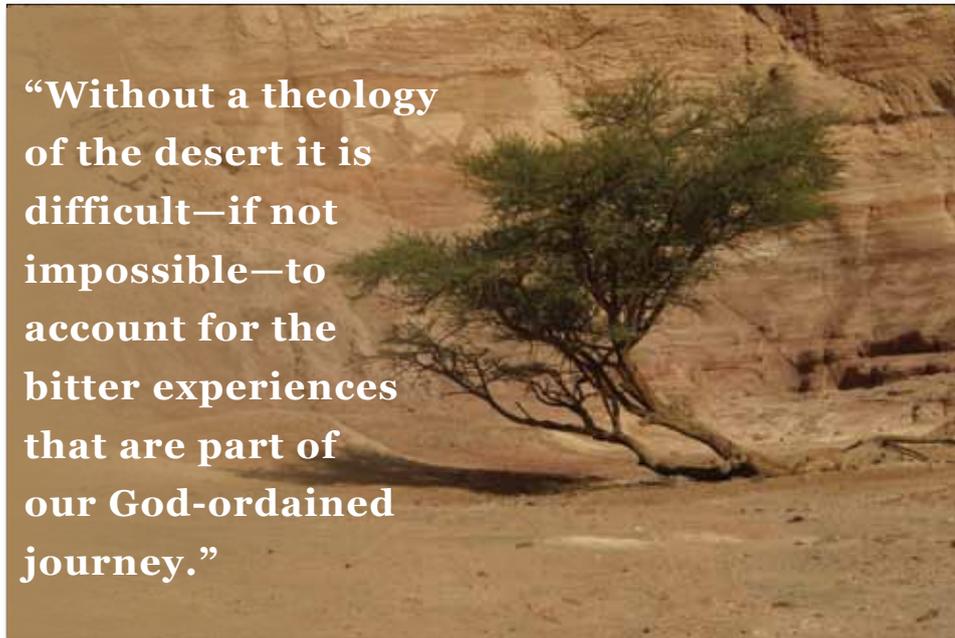
Fearful answered and said they were going to the City of Zion and had gotten up this difficult place. “But,” said Fearful, “the farther we go, the more danger we meet, and because of that we turned around and are going back.”

“Yes,” said Mistrust, “for just ahead lie a couple of lions in the path. We can’t tell whether they’re asleep or awake, but we couldn’t help but think they would quickly tear us to pieces if we came within reach.” Christian said, “You’re making me afraid, but where can I run to be safe? I’ll keep going forward.” So Fearful and Mistrust ran down the hill, and Christian went on his way.

Thinking again of what he had heard from the men, he felt in his coat for his Document so he could read it and be comforted; but he could not find it. Christian was greatly distressed and did not know what to do; but at last he remembered that he had slept

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When I was a boy in school, I often thought my teachers gave us tests because they were vindictive and cruel. It sure *felt* that way! As I've grown, I've come to realize that tests are good things, though they often inflict pain in the process. Teachers want to reveal what is in our heads so that we can learn from the experience and then move on to greater challenges and rewards. So it is with God.



By Tommy from Arad (Sinai desert) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

He tests us to humble us, to know what is in our hearts, whether or not we will obey him (Deut. 8:2).

God showed Moses a “tree” (Ex. 15:25 ESV) that amazingly turned the bitter water sweet. As the people quenched their thirst, they could continue their journey. Soon they reached Elim, a delightful place of twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees (Ex. 15:27).

American evangelicalism has no theology of the desert. We tend to believe that once we are out of Egypt we pass directly to the land of milk and honey. We have no concept of the desert that lies between our starting point and our destination. But without a theology of the desert it is difficult—if not impossible—to account for the bitter experiences that are part of our God-ordained journey.

Little wonder that many evangelicals, nourished on a gospel of health, wealth, and happiness, turn back in despair when they come to a painful experience.

This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the challenge that suffering and pain pose to Christian discipleship.

The story of what happened to God's children at Marah reminds us that bitter experiences are part of the normal Christian life, not the exception. God tests us because he loves us. He wants to show us how he can transform bitter experiences into something sweet by means of a “tree.” He also wants to use such tests to equip us so that we will be ready to face the giants in Canaan who are camping on our inheritance.

*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.... It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. (Ps. 119:67, 71)*

A few years ago, when I was preaching on Marah, I decided to capture the lessons I was learning by putting them into a creed.

Though my humble effort will never equal the great affirmations of faith of the historic church, the words help me whenever I discover that God has led me to a bitter place.

*I believe God led me here. This is a test.*

*I believe God will provide for me here. He will show me the tree<sup>†</sup> that transforms bitterness into something sweet.*

*I believe that God one day will lead me away from here to Elim, a place of 12 springs and 70 palm trees.*

*I believe God will use this experience to be a blessing and encouragement to others who are themselves facing a bitter experience in life. ✠*

<sup>†</sup> See I Peter 2:24 where Peter speaks of the cross as a “tree.”

**“Someone once said that the difference between American Christianity and Christianity as it is practiced in the rest of the world has to do with how each views suffering. In America Christians pray for the burden of suffering to be lifted from their backs. In the rest of the world, Christians pray for stronger backs so they can bear their suffering. That’s why we prefer going to movies instead of to hospitals and nursing homes.” —Dave Dravecky, *When You Can’t Come Back***

# My Soul Has Been Stretched

By Gerald L. Sittser



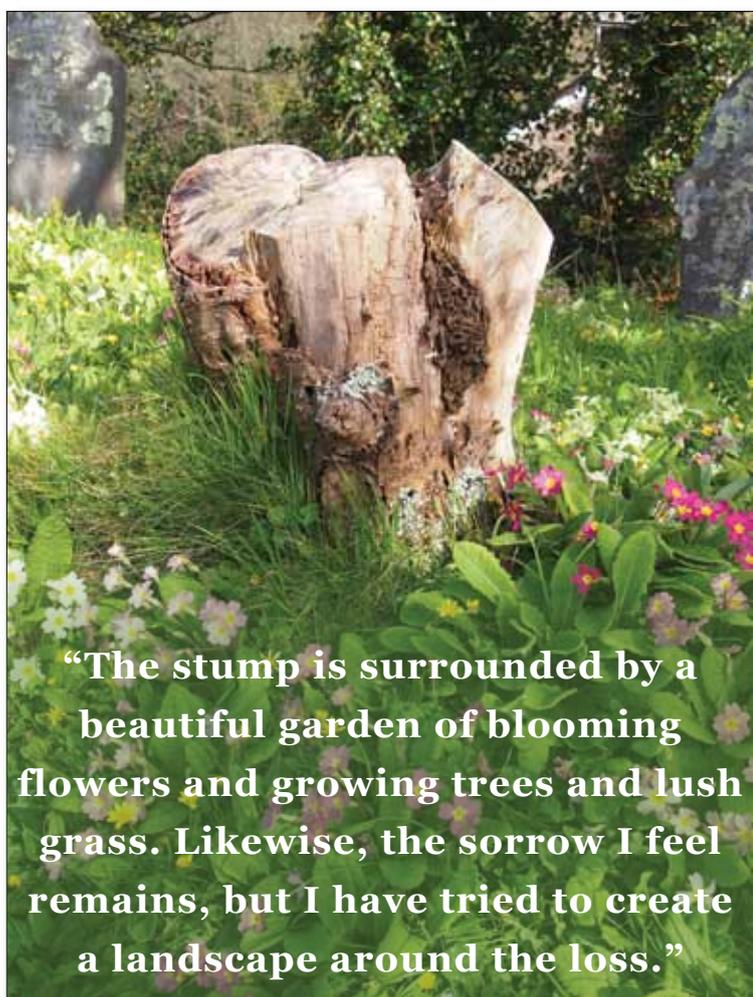
Gerald L. Sittser is a professor at Whitworth College who specializes in the History of Christianity, Christian Spirituality, and Religion in American Life. His book, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), tells the story of how his life was dramatically changed when a tragic automobile accident claimed the lives of his mother, his wife, and his young daughter. The article below is a compilation of excerpts from the book (p. 9–10,

42–43, 50–51, 179–80).

**I**t is not the *experience* of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives, for that is as inevitable as death, which is the last loss awaiting us all. It is how we *respond* to loss that matters. That response will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives.

This book is not intended to help anyone get over or even through the experience of catastrophic loss, for I believe that “recovery” from such loss is an unrealistic and even harmful expectation, if by recovery we mean resuming the way we lived and felt prior to the loss. Instead, the book is intended to show how it is possible to live in and be enlarged by loss, even as we continue to experience it.

Initially, my loss was so overwhelming to me that it was the dominant emotion—sometimes the only emotion—I had. I felt like I was staring at the stump of a huge tree



“The stump is surrounded by a beautiful garden of blooming flowers and growing trees and lush grass. Likewise, the sorrow I feel remains, but I have tried to create a landscape around the loss.”

By Lamerie (yew stump in a churchyard), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lamerie/25922306034>

that had just been cut down in my backyard. That stump, which sat all alone, kept reminding me of the beloved tree that I had lost. I could think of nothing but that tree. Every time I looked out the window, all I could see was that stump. Eventually, however, I decided to do something about it. I landscaped my backyard, reclaiming it once again as my own. I decided to keep the stump there, since it was both too big and too precious to remove. Instead of getting rid of it, I worked around it. I planted shrubs, trees, flowers, and grass. I laid out a brick pathway and built two benches. Then I watched everything grow. Now, three years later, the stump remains, still reminding me of the beloved tree I lost. But the stump is surrounded by a beautiful garden of blooming flowers and growing trees and lush grass. Likewise, the sorrow I feel remains, but I have tried to create a landscape around the loss so that what was once ugly is now an integral part of a larger, lovely whole.

I did not find it helpful, nor did I find it true in my experience, to identify these various responses as “stages” through which I had to pass on my way to “recovery.” For one thing, I have still not moved beyond these stages, and I am not sure I ever will. I still feel anger, I still want to bargain with God, I still face the temptation of indulging my appetites, and I still want to deny that the tragedy is true. Not that I feel the urge to escape as intensely as I used to, but that is because my internal capacity to live with loss has grown.

The problem with viewing these avenues of escape as stages is that it raises the false expectation that we go through them only once. That has not been true for me. I have revisited them again and again. If anything, I have not moved beyond these stages but *below* them. I have learned that they were desperate attempts to avoid having to face the real problem, which I fought off as long as I could. I finally became so exhausted trying to run from the real problem that I simply gave up. In the end I was forced to address the problem of life’s mortality—*my* mortality—which for a time made me profoundly depressed.

The accident itself bewilders me as much today as it did three years ago. Much good has come from it, but all the good in the world will never make the accident itself good. It remains a horrible, tragic, and evil event to me. A million people could be helped as a result of the tragedy, but that would not be enough to explain and justify it. I do not believe that I lost three members of my family *in order that* I might change for the better, raise three healthy children, or write a book. I still want them back,

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I wonder whether we have also misunderstood pleasure. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines pleasure as a condition “induced by the enjoyment or anticipation of what is felt or viewed as good or desirable... the opposite of pain.” Leonardo da Vinci saw things differently. He sketched in his notebooks a solitary male figure splitting into two, about belly height: two torsos, two bearded heads, and four arms, like Siamese twins joined at the waist. “Allegory of Pleasure and Pain,” he entitled the study, commenting, “Pleasure and Pain are represented as twins, as though they were joined together, for there is never the one without the other.”

For much of my life I would have, like the *Oxford English Dictionary*, classified pleasure as the opposite of pain. Now, though, I agree more closely with da Vinci’s depiction of pleasure and pain as Siamese twins. One reason is that I no longer see pain as an enemy to flee. From pain-deprived people I have learned that I cannot easily enjoy life without the protection provided by pain. There is another factor, too; increasingly I have become aware of the curious intertwining of pain and pleasure.

When I speak to church or medical groups I often tell stories from my childhood or my surgical career in India. “Oh, you poor thing,” someone may respond, “growing up without plumbing or electricity or even radio. And the sacrifices you made working with such sad people in those harsh conditions!” I stare dumbfounded at the sympathizer, realizing how differently we must view pleasure and fulfillment. With the luxury of age, I can look back on three-quarters of a century, and without a doubt the times that seemed to involve personal struggle now shine with a peculiar radiance.



**“I would like to require every potential addict of crack cocaine to watch a video of the rats pushing levers, smiling on the way to their deaths. They demonstrate the seductive fallacy of pursuing pleasure artificially.”**

Perhaps the same principle helps account for a trend that seems almost universal in the reminiscences of older people: they tend to recall difficult times with nostalgia. The elderly swap stories about World War II and the Great Depression. They speak fondly of blizzards, the childhood outhouse, and the time in graduate school when they ate canned soup and stale bread three weeks in a row. Against a dim background of hardship and deprivation there came to light new resources of sharing and courage and interdependence that brought unexpected pleasure and even joy.

I may risk sounding like an old man reminiscing about “the good old days,” but nonetheless I suspect that affluence has made the modern industrialized West a more difficult place in which to experience pleasure. This is a deep irony, because no society in history has succeeded so well in eliminating pain and exploiting leisure. Yet happiness tends to recede from those who pursue it. Ever elusive, it appears at unexpected moments, as a by-product rather than a product.

Recently scientists have identified a “pleasure center” in the brain which can be stimulated directly. Researchers have implanted electrodes in the hypothalamuses of rats, who are then placed in a cage in front of three levers. Pressing the first releases a piece of food, the second lever yields a drink, and the third activates electrodes that give the rats an immediate but transient feeling of pleasure. Laboratory rats quickly figure out the three levers, and in these experiments the rats choose to press only the pleasure lever, day after day, until they starve to death. Why respond to hunger and thirst when they can enjoy the pleasure associated with eating and drinking in a more convenient way?

I would like to require every potential addict of crack cocaine to watch a video of the rats pushing levers, smiling on the way to their deaths. They demonstrate the seductive fallacy of pursuing pleasure artificially.

Augustine said, “Everywhere a greater joy is preceded by a greater suffering.” This insight into pleasure is one that we in the affluent West need to remember. We dare not allow our daily lives to become so comfortable that we are no longer challenged to grow, to seek adventure, to risk.

In short, if I spend my life seeking pleasure through drugs, comfort, and luxury, it will probably elude me. Lasting pleasure is more apt to come as a surprising bonus from something I have invested myself in. Most likely that investment will include pain—it is hard to imagine pleasure without it. ✨

# Reigning Training

By Paul E. Billheimer



Former radio pastor and Bible College president, Paul E. Billheimer (1897–1984) understood that suffering in the life of the believer is not an exception to the rule but rather an indispensable part of God’s calling. Indeed, suffering prepares us to reign with him! The following article is an excerpt from a chapter in Billheimer’s book *Don’t Waste Your Sorrows: A Study in Sainthood and Suffering* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1977) entitled “The Mystery of Suffering” (p. 43–53).

**G**od is calling and preparing an Eternal Companion called the Bride, who is to sit with His Son on His throne as His co-regent in the ages to come (Rev. 3:21). In order to qualify for this exalted position, the members of the Bridehood *must* be as nearly like the Son as it is possible for the finite to be like the infinite. If they are to qualify for their lofty duties, they *must* share the character of God Himself which is agape love. *This is the norm of the universe*, the ideal toward which God is working for the eternal social order. But as we have seen, that quality of character cannot be developed in fallen humanity without suffering.

This explains Paul’s inspired revelation: “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (II Tim. 2:12). According to Romans 5:3–5 suffering issues in character (agape love), and character is a prerequisite to rulership. Because there is no character development without suffering, suffering is a necessary preparation for rulership.

It is clear that sorrow, suffering, tribulation and pain which come to the believer are not primarily for punishment but for child training. They are not purposeless. Earthly parents may make mistakes in their chastisement—and often do. But not God. He is preparing the

believer for rulership in a universe so vast that it appears infinite. It seems that God cannot fully decentralize fallen man, even though born again, sanctified or filled with the Holy Spirit, without suffering. Watchman Nee says that we never learn anything new about God except through adversity. Some consider this an exaggeration, but it does seem that few seek a deeper walk with God except under duress.

The experience of the Psalmist is illustrative: “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now I have kept thy Word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119:67, 71).

One of the most amazing commentaries on the purposefulness of suffering in the economy of God is set forth in Hebrews 2:10: “For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation *perfect through sufferings*.” “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience *by the things which he suffered*” (Heb. 5:8). The fact that Christ’s human experience had to be perfected by suffering proves that no suffering is purposeless, but that it is endemic in God’s economy.

There is no way that Christlike character can be formed in man without suffering because he cannot be decentralized otherwise. If he will not suffer, if he determines to evade it, if he refuses to allow the life of nature and of self to go to the cross, to that extent he will remain hard, self-centered, unbroken, and therefore unChristlike.

There can be no spiritual progress, therefore, except through the progressive death of the self-life. Maclaren has said that every step on the pathway of spiritual progress will be marked by the bloody footprints of wounded self-love. All along the course of spiritual advancement one will have to set up altars upon which even the legitimate self-life will have to be sacrificed.

To make the moral choices that develop God-like character always causes pain because even after one has been sanctified, filled with the Holy Spirit, one is still fallen. Some people feel that after these experiences of grace, nothing remains in their spiritual life with which God has a controversy. But the work of sanctification is both instantaneous and progressive. It will continue until glorification.

How meaningful are the words of Jesus in John 15:1, “My Father is the husbandman”—not

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**“If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (II Tim. 2:12)**



# Embracing the Mystery of Suffering

By Peter Kreeft



Peter Kreeft is a professor of philosophy at Boston College and author of many books. A Catholic, he writes in the style of C. S. Lewis, addressing both mind and heart. The following article is excerpted from his book *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986) and draws from Chapter 1 ("The Problem," p. 1–25) and Chapter 7 ("The Clues Converge: Jesus, the Tears of God," p. 129–40).

**T**he case against God can be quite simply put like this: How can a mother trust and love a God who let her baby die? It is not just that the suffering is not deserved; it is that it seems random and pointless, distributed according to no rhyme or reason but mere chance, and working no good, no end. For everyone who becomes a hero and a saint through suffering, there are ten who seem to become dehumanized, depressed, or despairing.

And the universality of it—there's the rub. Your neighbor, your best friend, your doctor, your auto mechanic all have deep and hidden hurts that you don't know about, just as you have some that they don't know about. Everybody out there is hurting. And if you don't know that, you're either very naïve and believe in people's facades, or so thick-skinned that you don't hurt yourself and don't feel other people's hurts either

I will now tell you my most terrible secret. I get very mad at God sometimes, especially when he lets me get hurt. In fact, I will let a million cats out of the bag. I will tell all the doubters and unbelievers who are reading this a terrible secret most Christians do not tell: I think almost every believing Christian gets mad at God sometimes. This is a pretty well-kept secret, especially among evangelicals

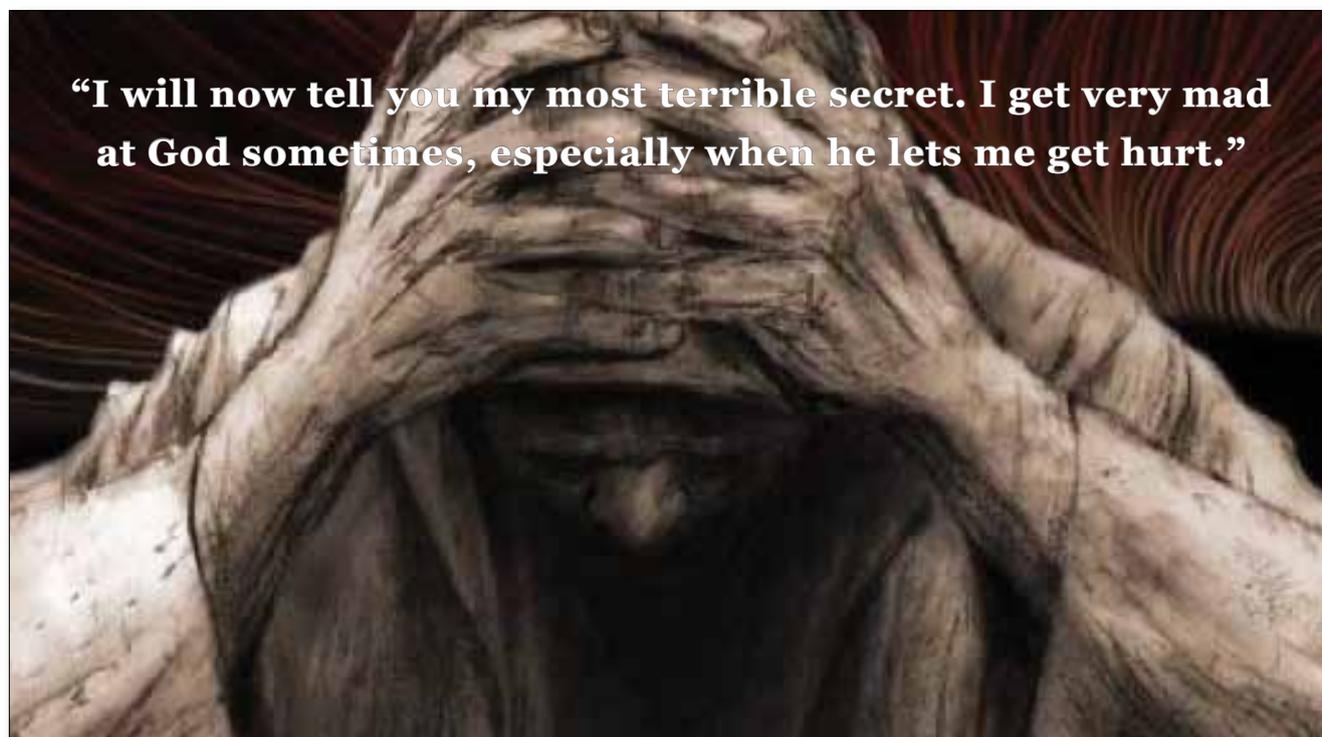
and fundamentalists. I confess it not to cause scandal or to help the cause of unbelief but simply because it is true.

Even Teresa of Avila, when thrown off her carriage, slammed rudely to the ground, and deposited in a mud puddle, questioned God. He answered her, "This is how I treat all my friends." Her tart reply was, "Then, Lord, it is not surprising that you have so few." Even saints do not smile sweetly when God throws them into mud puddles. Only pigs do that.

How can an all-powerful and all-loving God allow his innocent babies to suffer? That is the problem; not just suffering but the scandal of suffering in a God-made and God-ruled universe. Like Job, I have wrestled with God about suffering, as most people have, though I have not experienced unusual suffering, as Job did. This book is the account of the process as well as the results of that wrestling match. I will tell you at the beginning what the results were: I lost. Like Job. And that is the only possible way to win.

[In this seventh chapter, we come to] the most important chapter in this book, for it is the answer, the only adequate answer, to our problem of man's suffering and God's silence. We are finally led not to the answer but to the Answerer. As in Job, God ends his silence and speaks his word. Christ is the Word of God, the answer of God. The answer must be someone, not just something. For the problem (suffering) is about someone (God—why does he... why doesn't he?) rather than just something. It is a little child with tears in its eyes looking up at Daddy

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in the arbor on the side of the hill. Falling down on his knees, he asked God to forgive his foolish act and went back to look for his Document, carefully looking on this side and that side all the way. He went back in hope that he might find the Document that had been his comfort so many times in his journey. He continued until he came again within sight of the arbor where he had sat and slept, but seeing it just increased his sorrow by bringing the evil of his slumber into his mind again.

By this time, he had arrived back at the arbor where he sat down for a while weeping. But at last, sorrowfully looking under the seat, he saw (as he was hoping) his Document. With trembling and haste he picked it up and put it next to his heart in his coat. Who can understand how joyful Christian was when he had found his Document again? For this Document provided him assurance of life and acceptance at the desired Place of Refuge. He took it up again, therefore, and, giving thanks to God for directing his eye to the place where it lay, he returned to his journey with joy and weeping. But, oh, how alertly he went up the rest of the hill.

Yet, the sun went down upon Christian before he had reached the top of the hill, and this made him once again recall to his mind the foolishness of his sleeping. So Christian again began to grieve with himself. “Oh, you sinful slumber!” he began. “Because of you I could be overcome by darkness in my journey.” Then he remembered the story Mistrust and Fearful told him, how they were frightened by the sight of the lions. Christian said to himself again, “These beasts wander about in the night for their prey, and if they should meet with me in the darkness, how shall I evade them? How will I escape from being torn in pieces by them?”

So he went on his way, but while he was lamenting his unhappy circumstance, he lifted up his eyes and saw before him a very stately palace. The name of the palace was Beautiful, and it stood just by the side of the Highway.

I saw in my dream that Christian moved hastily toward the palace and went forward so that if possible he could get lodging there. Now before he had gone far, he entered into a very narrow passage that was about an eighth of a mile from the porter’s lodge. Looking very closely as he went, he saw two lions in the way.

**“Meaninglessness comes not from being weary of pain but from being weary of pleasure.”**

**—G. K. Chesterton**

“Now,” Christian thought, “I see the dangers that drove back Mistrust and Fearful.” The lions were chained, but the Pilgrim did not see the chains, so he was afraid.

He considered going back and following Mistrust and Fearful, for he thought nothing but death was before him. But noticing that Christian paused as if he would go back, the Porter (whose name was Watchful) cried out to him, saying, “Is your strength so small? Don’t fear the lions, for they’re chained. They’re placed there for the trial of faith, to find out where it is and to reveal those who have none. Stay in the middle of the path, and no injury will come to you.”

Then I saw that Christian walked on. He trembled for fear of the lions. He heard their roar, but, heeding the directions of the Porter, they did not harm him. He clapped his hands with joy and went on until he came and stood before the gate where the Porter was. Then Christian said to the Porter, “Sir, what is this house? May I stay here tonight?” The Porter answered, “This house was built by the Lord of the Hill, and He built it for the relief and security of Pilgrims.” ✦

*My Soul Has Been Stretched continued from page 4*

and I always will, no matter what happens as a result of their deaths.

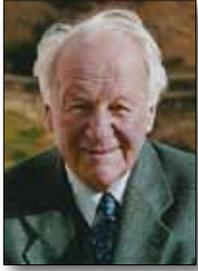
Yet the grief I feel is sweet as well as bitter. I still have a sorrowful soul; yet I wake up every morning joyful, eager for what the new day will bring. Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years; yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life. Never have I felt so broken; yet never have I been so whole. Never have I been so aware of my weakness and vulnerability; yet never have I been so content and felt so strong. Never has my soul been more dead; yet never has my soul been more alive. What I once considered mutually exclusive—sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure, death and life—have become parts of a greater whole. My soul has been stretched.

Above all, I have become aware of the power of God’s grace and my need for it. My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of God. God has been present in my life these past three years, even mysteriously in the accident. God will continue to be present to the end of my life and through all eternity. God is growing my soul, making it bigger, and filling it with himself. My life is being transformed.

Loss can diminish us, but it can also expand us. It depends on the choices we make and the grace we receive. ✦

# The Long Silence

By John R.W. Stott (1921–2011)



In his wonderful book *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 1986), John R. W. Stott cites a “playlet” entitled “The Long Silence” but gives no information about the original author or the work in which it first appeared. We quote it here as it appears in Stott’s book (p. 327–28).

**A**t the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God’s throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly—not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

“Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?” snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. “We endured terror... beatings... torture... death!”

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. “What about this?” he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. “Lynched... for no crime but being black!”

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. “Why should I suffer” she murmured, “It wasn’t my fault.”

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth—as a man!

“Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be

betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

“At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.”

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No-one uttered another word. No-one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence. ✱



Satan, but *My Father*. Not understanding God's benevolent purpose, when sorrow and suffering come—whether as the result of conflict over moral choices, or pain and physical illness, or of disappointing circumstances—it is easy to fall into a spirit of resentment and self-pity which produces frustration and depression. When this occurs one is defeated in his spiritual life, and character deteriorates. *He has wasted his sorrow*. What God permitted in order to wean him from self-love and self-worship, and therefore for his spiritual growth, has resulted in loss.

Suffering, from whatever source, of whatever nature, and of whatever intensity, plus triumphant acceptance equals character (Rom. 5:3–4). Character (agape love) is the coin, the legal tender of heaven. Therefore, “our light affliction which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,” that is, an exceedingly higher rank. Affliction, triumphantly accepted here, means rank there because this is the way God builds selfless character and develops agape love. Suffering, triumphantly accepted, slays the self-life, delivers one from self-centeredness, and frees one to love.

Those who have thus suffered will form the elite, the aristocracy, the ruling nobility of the future. They will constitute the princes of the ethereal realm.

In order to grow in character, it is necessary to understand that nothing that God permits to come to His child, whether “good” or “ill,” is accidental or without design. Everything is intended to drive him out of himself into God. “All life is intended to be a pathway to God” (MacLaren). All is for the purpose of character training. *There are no exceptions.* ✨

## Soldier's Prayer

*By Amy Carmichael*

*From prayer that asks that I may be  
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,  
From fearing when I should aspire,  
From faltering when I should climb higher  
From silken self, O Captain, free  
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.*

*From subtle love of softening things,  
From easy choices, weakenings,  
(Not thus are spirits fortified,  
Not this way went the Crucified)  
From all that dims Thy Calvary,  
O Lamb of God, deliver me.*

*Give me the love that leads the way,  
The faith that nothing can dismay,  
The hope no disappointments tire,  
The passion that will burn like fire;  
Let me not sink to be a clod;  
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.*

and weeping, “Why?” This is not merely the philosophers’ “why?” Not only does it add the emotion of tears but also it is asked in the context of relationship. It is a question put to the Father, not a question asked in a vacuum. The hurt child needs not so much explanations as reassurances. And that is what we get: the reassurance of the Father in the person of Jesus, “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

What then is suffering to the Christian? It is Christ's invitation to us to follow him. Christ goes to the cross, and we are invited to follow to the same cross. Not because it is the cross, but because it is his. Suffering is blessed not because it is suffering but because it is his. Suffering is not the context that explains the cross; the cross is the context that explains suffering. The cross gives this new meaning to suffering; it is now not only between God and me but also between Father and Son.

In summary, Jesus did three things to solve the problem of suffering. First, he came. He suffered with us. He wept. Second, in becoming man he transformed the meaning of our suffering: it is now part of his work of redemption. Our death pangs become birth pangs for heaven, not only for ourselves but also for those we love. Third, he died and rose. Dying, he paid the price for sin and opened heaven to us; rising, he transformed death from a hole into a door, from an end to a beginning. ✨

## God Knows What He's About

*By Angela Morgan (adapted)*

*When God wants to drill a man,  
And thrill a man,  
And skill a man  
To play the noblest part;  
When He yearns with all His heart  
To create so great and bold a man  
That all the world shall be amazed,  
Watch His methods, watch His ways!*

*How He ruthlessly perfects  
Whom He royally elects!  
How He hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows converts him  
Into trial shapes of clay which  
Only God understands;  
While his tortured heart is crying  
And he lifts beseeching hands!  
How he bends but never breaks  
When his good He undertakes;  
How He uses whom He chooses,  
And with every purpose fuses him;  
By every act induces him  
To try his splendor out –  
God knows what He's about.*

# The Loving Surgeon

By François Fénelon (1651–1715)



François Fénelon was a French Roman Catholic archbishop, theologian, writer, and royal tutor. Deeply influenced by the life and ministry of Madame Guyon, Fénelon experienced God in profound ways. His spiritual influence reached many beyond the Catholic church, including John Wesley. The following excerpt is taken from a collection of his spiritual letters entitled *Christian*

*Perfection* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947). See chapter 21, “The Value and Use of Crosses” (p. 82–84).

We have much trouble convincing ourselves of the kindness with which God crushes those he loves with crosses. Why take pleasure, we say, in making us suffer? Would he not know how to make us good without making us miserable? But God, who could have saved us without crosses, has not wished to do so. In this he is the master. We have only to be silent, and to adore his profound wisdom without understanding it. The operation of grace, which detaches us from ourselves and which uproots our self-love, cannot, without a miracle of grace, avoid being painful.

Why are we revolted by the long-drawn-out suffering? It is our attachment to ourselves, and it is this attachment which God wants to destroy. Because, while we cling to ourselves, God’s work is not accomplished. Then of what can we complain? Our trouble is being attached to creatures, and still more to ourselves.

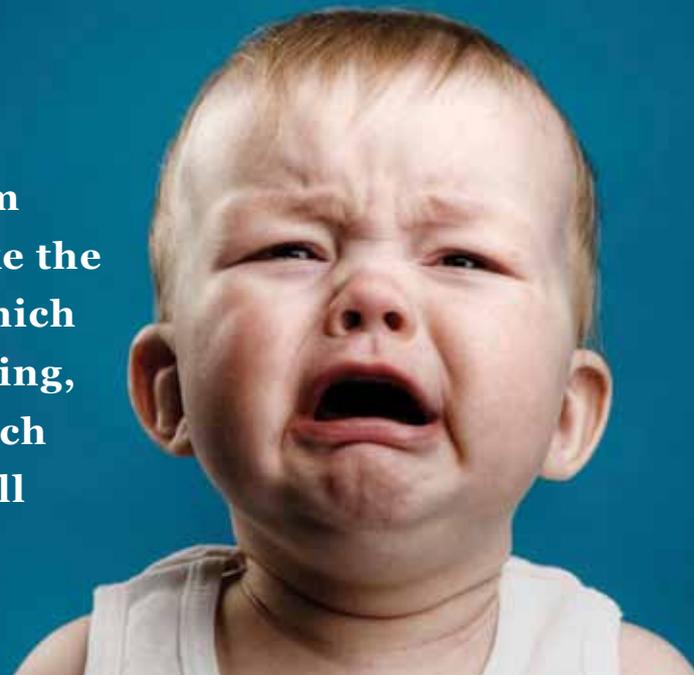
God prepares a series of happenings which detaches us little by little from creatures, and which at last tears us away from ourselves. This operation is painful, but it is our corruption which makes it necessary, and that is the cause of the pain we bear. If this flesh were healthy, the

surgeon would not make any incision. He only cuts in proportion to the depth of the wound, and the area of the infection. If the operation causes us so much pain, it is because the infection is bad. Is it cruelty in the surgeon to cut to the quick? No, on the contrary, it is affection. It is skill. He would thus treat his only son.

God treats us in the same way. He never makes trouble for us except in spite of himself, so to speak. His father’s heart does not try to desolate us. But he cuts to the quick to cure the ulcer of our heart. He has to take from us what we love too dearly, what we love in the wrong way and without discretion, what we love to the prejudice of his love.

He makes us weep like children from whom we take the knife with which they are playing, and with which they could kill themselves. We weep, we are discouraged, we cry out loud. We are ready to murmur against God, as children are vexed with their mothers. But God lets us cry, and saves us. He afflicts us only to correct us. Even then when he seems to overwhelm us, it is for our good, it is to spare us from the harm which we would do to ourselves. What we weep for would have made us weep eternally. What we believe to have lost was lost when we thought we had it. God has taken it into safe-keeping to give it back to us soon in the eternity which draws near. He takes from us the things which we love, only to make us love them with a pure love, strong and balanced, to assure us an eternal joy in his bosom, and to do a hundred times more good to us, than we would know how to desire for ourselves. ✨

**“He makes us weep like children from whom we take the knife with which they are playing, and with which they could kill themselves.”**



# Prayer

**Hemlock Inn Retreats 2016**  
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**“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.” —C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain***

**The High Calling—July–August 2016**

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