

"Looks unflinchingly at our struggles and provides a biblical pathway to victory."

Lee Strobel, bestselling author

CLAY JONES  
& JEAN E. JONES

**HOW DOES  
GOD  
USE SUFFERING  
FOR OUR  
GOOD?**

LIVING WITH HOPE  
WHILE MAKING SENSE OF LIFE

*“How Does God Use Suffering for Our Good?”* is a rare blend of biblical insight and real-world wisdom from two thoughtful authors who have firsthand experience with the topic. Clay and Jean Jones tackle one of life’s toughest questions with the investigative rigor and clarity I value as a detective. Their seven practical truths offer not just answers, but genuine hope for anyone navigating hardship.”

—**J. Warner Wallace**, Dateline-featured cold-case detective and author of *Cold-Case Christianity* and *The Truth in True Crime*

“Clay and Jean E. have provided such a gift to the church with this book. In transparently sharing their own journey of suffering, they model a theologically robust and God-glorifying faith that will bring readers both comfort and strength for the darkest times. Every one of us will endure dark times—the only question is how we’ll respond. The powerful insights in this book offer answers that will bring you peace no matter the trial.”

—**Natasha Crain**, speaker, podcaster, and author of five books, including *When Culture Hates You*

“Here is a profound and intensely practical book that looks unflinchingly at our struggles and provides a biblical pathway toward victory. My friends Clay and Jean E. Jones speak from personal experience about how we can find hope and meaning through the valleys of life. Take an eye-opening and heart-enlarging journey with them, and you’ll emerge encouraged, uplifted, and—though it may seem counterintuitive—ever more grateful to God.”

—**Lee Strobel**, bestselling author of *The Case for Christ* and *Seeing the Supernatural*

“There are a lot of books on God and suffering, but *How Does God Use Suffering for Our Good?* stands out for a few reasons. First, it is rooted in firsthand experience. Both Clay and Jean share personal hurt and suffering that frames the entire book. Second, it is biblical. Scripture is the authoritative source for all the wisdom and advice that flows from this book. Third, it is deeply honest. The Joneses do not shy away from difficult questions about suffering. They lean into them, and yet they offer wisdom to face them with hope and joy. I could not recommend this book more highly.”

—**Sean McDowell, PhD**, is a professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, the author or editor of more than 20 books, and a popular YouTuber

“When you’re struggling, it’s easy for people to whisper sweet lies full of cherry-picked scriptures with ‘scriptural promises.’ And that may make you feel good for a little while...until real life comes crashing down, demolishing all these simplistic notions of how life is supposed to be for a Christian. When that happens, you need real answers and real comfort. That is what this book provides. The Christian life is full of suffering—which is exactly what God promised us! There is no plan B for the Christian. In *How Does God Use Suffering for Our Good?*, Clay and Jean E. Jones provide biblical comfort with biblical encouragement (i.e., infusing courage!) in the face of life’s toughest problems. And they don’t lob these truth bombs from afar; they walk with them daily in their lives. I have seen it firsthand. If you as a Christian want to know how to honor God and have joy within suffering, then this is the book for you.”

—**Hillary Morgan Ferrer**, founder/president of *Mama Bear Apologetics*®. Primary author/editor of *Mama Bear Apologetics*®: *Empowering Your Kids to Challenge Cultural Lies* and *Mama Bear Apologetics*® *Guide to Sexuality and Gender Identity: Empowering Your Kids to Understand and Live Out God’s Design*

“What does a ministry-minded Christian couple do when they experience five miscarriages, numerous disappointments, doubts, unanswered prayer, and incurable cancer? They praise God and write a comforting and brilliant new book that will help thousands of others experiencing pain and suffering. Clay and Jean E. Jones reveal from their own lives and the Scriptures how God uses even the most devastating events for good both now and in eternity. This is as real as it gets, folks. Read and be encouraged!”

—**Frank Turek**, author and speaker

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Thank You, Father, for how You use suffering to care for us.

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# PREFACE

What if the Lord appeared to you in an unambiguous and unmistakable vision and said that in three years you would be moving to Belize where you would spend the rest of your life? Unless you had already frequented Belize, we suspect that the moment the vision ended you would Google “Belize.” We also suspect that in the days that followed, you would continue to seek more information on Belize. Where might you live? What would you do? What might you eat? Crime rate? Climate? And so on. After all, if you knew with absolute certainty that you were going to live in Belize, you would want to prepare for that, right?

Although it’s not impossible, it’s unlikely that any of us are going to get an unambiguous and unmistakable vision telling us we’re going to move to Belize, or anywhere else for that matter. We humans know nothing *absolutely, positively for sure* about our future other than the fact that one day, we, and everyone we know, will die. We don’t know with absolute certainty what will happen tomorrow (after all, we could die in our sleep tonight—it happens). But there is one thing we do know for sure: Unless we die young and suddenly, we are all going to experience suffering and die.

Although some people suffer more than others—sometimes much, much more than others—unless one dies young and suddenly, we

won't get out of this life without suffering. After all, as I (Clay) like to tell groups I am speaking to, "Only one thing will prevent you from watching everyone you know die from murder, accident, or disease and that will be your own death from murder, accident, or disease." When I say this, I usually add, "So have a nice day!" Then after a pause I kid, "But when I die, I want to die like my grandfather died—peacefully and in his sleep—not screaming like the passengers in his car."<sup>1</sup> The audience always laughs heartily because we're dealing with a hard truth. Unless one dies young and suddenly, no one is getting out of *this life* without immense suffering. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus we can live forever! We'll talk a lot about that in the pages to come.

If the only thing we know absolutely, positively for sure about our future is that we are going to suffer and then die, we should prepare for that! Shouldn't we make sure we are ready? This makes sense, right? The two of us (Clay and Jean) have endured a lot of suffering in our lives and we have been striving to do what the Bible teaches in preparation for suffering—seeking to do what the Bible says when suffering strikes. The good news is we can tell you that we have been victorious over suffering, and you can be too. The best preparation is to have a robust view of the glory that will await us throughout eternity, for heaven will be gloriously better than whatever we could ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). We'll talk about that much more in what follows.

## HOW WE CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

We started writing this book about two years prior to our finding out Clay had metastasized cancer. Although many Christians start writing books on suffering after they find out they are seriously ill, that's not why we started writing *How Does God Use Suffering for Our Good?* We have both been Word-abiding Christians for more than 50 years,

and during that time have always seen our Lord turn suffering into our good. In fact, as you will see, how God has used suffering in our lives is not simply good, but great.

## WHAT WE COVER

This book is about how to be victorious in suffering. All believers can be victorious and triumphant in suffering. The history of the Christian church abounds with examples of those who have been victorious in suffering—we will mention many of them. We intend to be very specific in how we have overcome our own suffering, so this book is not theoretical—we have lived and are living what we write in these pages.

This book is not a book about the larger question of why God allows evil. Clay already published a well-regarded book on that subject entitled *Why Does God Allow Evil?: Compelling Answers for Life's Toughest Questions* (Harvest House, 2017). In that book, Clay answers such questions as why we suffer for Adam's sin, why God allows children to suffer, the destiny of the unevangelized, the fairness of hell, the nature of free will, and how our glorious eternity will dwarf our suffering on earth to insignificance.

Regarding the seven truths that comprise most of this book, we really do practice them—regularly! What follows isn't theory. We really employ the truths we'll describe and, not shockingly, it turns out that doing what God says to do has immensely helped us.

## A LITTLE ABOUT US

For years, Clay taught a graduate-level course, "Why God Allows Evil," in the Christian Apologetics program at Talbot School of Theology. Responding to student questions and objections honed his answers about evil and suffering. Clay then authored *Why Does God*

*Allow Evil?: Compelling Answers for Life's Toughest Questions* (Harvest House, 2017). Later he published a book on how the Christian can experience victory in facing death entitled *Immortal: How the Fear of Death Drives Us and What We Can Do About It* (Harvest House, 2020).

Jean has always been involved in all of Clay's teaching and writing. She edited all his books and articles, and she honed and originated many of the concepts he taught. In addition, Jean is the coauthor of five women's Bible studies. *Discovering Hope in the Psalms* (Harvest House, 2017) demonstrates how to pray psalms of lament when suffering. *Discovering Joy in Philippians* (Harvest House, 2019) explains how to build joy amid difficulties. *Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament* (Harvest House, 2019) and *Discovering Good News in John* (Harvest House, 2022) strengthen faith as they explore why and how Jesus suffered for us to bring us into the glorious kingdom of God. *Discovering Wisdom in Proverbs* (Harvest House, 2023) embraces Scripture's time-honored truths about how to live a blessed life.

## INTRODUCTION

# PREPARING TO CONQUER

C.S. Lewis writes, “Scripture and tradition habitually put the joys of heaven into the scale against the sufferings of earth, and no solution of the problem of pain that does not do so can be called a Christian one.”<sup>1</sup> Sadly, however, an overwhelming majority of books on suffering barely give the “joys of heaven” a nod. I (Clay) recently reviewed a book sent to me on how to help those who are suffering based on the author’s own suffering, but it saddened me because it had little to say about the glory that awaits us for eternity. Regrettably for many, the glory of eternity has become an also-ran doctrine. The glory we are to receive is underappreciated, and so eternity becomes the “P.S.” to the Christian life.

*Glory* is an odd word.<sup>2</sup> It is the strongest word that communicates magnificence, courage, resplendence, beauty, worthiness, honor, and renown. Americans call their flag “Old Glory.” We use glory to describe our army’s victory in battle. Sometimes, we say that mountains and sunsets are glorious. At times people will attribute glory to themselves or something they’ve done (for example, computer gamers sometimes talk about their glorious victories). But humans rarely refer to other humans as glorious except sarcastically: “There he is in all his glory.” *Glorious* means “possessing or deserving glory: illustrious,” “marked by great beauty or splendor: magnificent,” or “delightful, wonderful.”<sup>3</sup>

We humans long for glory, and for Christians to be victorious over, to overcome, and to conquer suffering we absolutely, positively must revel in our glorious eternal future. In fact, Paul tells the Colossians that he always thanks God for them because “we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love that *spring* from the hope stored up for you in heaven” (Colossians 1:4-5 niv).<sup>4</sup> Notice that faith and love “spring” from the hope of heaven. So important is hope that, as Richard R. Melick writes in his commentary on Colossians, it provides “the basis for Christian growth since the most basic elements of faith toward God and love toward others grow out of hope. In reality, without hope there is no reason for faith or love, and everything is directed to ourselves and our world.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed. Consider that if in life we were simply going to watch everyone we love die and then die ourselves, and there was no future, no hope beyond that, then what good could spring from that despair? Even if we believed there was a God, it would be hard to live a life of love if we thought that, ultimately, we would cease to exist. Our hope is the desire and expectation of a great eternity where we will be welcomed into God’s presence and reunited with loved ones. Without hope it would be impossible not to be self-interested and faithless. How could we have faith without the hope of a glorious eternity? As Hebrews 11:1 puts it, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith and the hope of eternity are inextricably linked. You can’t have one without the other. The brighter our view of eternal glory, the more easily we will overcome the sufferings of this life.

### **REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS ABOUT VICTORY OVER SUFFERING**

Now, we must be clear. We’re not saying that we, or anyone else, are ever going to write anything that will make suffering only tickle. We’re not saying that being victorious in suffering will mean that

believers won't mourn, cry—even sob—or be in pain. We don't mean that we've never had teary, sad days—we've had many! Jesus wept (Luke 19:41; John 11:35), and Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4). But Christians can be victorious while suffering (even when crying our eyes out). By this we mean two things.

The first way believers can have a victorious day while suffering is by honoring God through suffering, even if experiencing immense emotional or physical pain. We have done this habitually. We have honored God and thanked Him for the hardship we were enduring in the moment we were enduring it. For example, in January 2004, Clay was in immense pain and was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. After we hung up the phone with the oncologist, with tears streaming down our faces, we immediately prayed a prayer of thanksgiving to God. At that moment, we knew we had honored God in suffering and had defeated Satan in the heavenly places. We have prayed similar prayers amid other sufferings, and we have been victorious in the heavenly realms because of it. We will say more about this later.

The second way Christians can have victory while suffering is by rejoicing in the glory that God is working in us precisely because we are suffering. Paul wrote, "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings" (Romans 5:2-3). James wrote, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*" (James 1:2-4). Peter wrote, "You have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7). In other words, we can have a sense of joy while suffering. The parents of brides or grooms do this all the time. They're sad to "lose" a son or daughter but thankful for the blessing their child is about to receive. Likewise, women in labor are often in immense pain but can also rejoice that



soon their suffering will be rewarded by the birth of a child. Similarly, recognizing that our suffering—our “light momentary affliction,” as Paul calls it—“is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17) enables us to rejoice in a glory that transcends any earthly hardship. We can be victorious in suffering by realizing that suffering prepares us for eternal glory.

### IS THIS WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS?

At the outset, we must answer a question that might confuse some Christians. Repeatedly, we will quote verses like 2 Timothy 2:12, “If we *endure* we will also reign with him”; Revelation 21:7 (NIV), “Those who are *victorious* will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children”; Revelation 3:21 (NIV), “To the one who is *victorious*, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne”; and so on. These verses are *not* teaching works righteousness. We are not saved by our own goodness. We have not forgotten about the Protestant Reformation. We are indeed saved by grace alone through faith alone. But there is a reformation maxim from John Calvin that applies: “Faith alone saves but the faith that saves is never alone.”<sup>6</sup> Here are the first three theses of Martin Luther’s *95 Theses* that began the Reformation in earnest:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner

repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.<sup>7</sup>

Notice that Luther said that a person is not repenting at all unless that repentance changes the person's behavior.<sup>8</sup> This makes sense because people live their lives based on what they sincerely believe, and if you sincerely believe that Jesus really is God who died for our sins and was raised from the dead, that He is coming back to judge the world, and that all of eternity awaits, you will live in accord with those beliefs.

### **WHAT TO DO NOW: PRAY FOR REVELATION ABOUT THE GLORY THAT AWAITS**

Therefore, dear Christian, we urge you to stop and pray right now that God will give you a revelation of the glory that awaits us in heaven forever. That revelation will enable you to be victorious over suffering.

### **PREPARING TO SUFFER**

About 20 years ago, I (Clay) was speaking on why God allows evil to around 40 to 50 guys crammed into a Biola University men's dorm. When finished, I took questions. The last question that night was, "Do you have any general advice for us?" I was surprised and asked what kind of advice the young man was looking for. He replied, "I don't know, just any general advice?" I responded, "Well, yes, I do: *READ the Bible and DO what it says!*" He said, "That's simple." And it is simple—not easy, but simple. But, sadly, so few Christians actually do this. Yet this is what every Bible-believing pastor I know considers "basic Christianity." Christians not only need to read the Bible; they need to abide in the Bible and do what it says. Abiding in God's

Word is the first action that prepares us for the disasters, panics, and inevitable suffering that life always brings.

In Luke 6:46-48, Jesus says,

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built.

But then, in verse 49, Jesus warns that the one who only hears His words but does not do them “is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” The bottom line: Jesus says that only those who hear God’s Word *and do it* will survive calamity.

Even non-Christians like the saying, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” But few know that Jesus gave a condition: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). You truly are *not* Jesus’ disciple unless you abide in Jesus’ Word; and that doesn’t mean you simply read a verse now and then. Similarly, in Psalm 1:2-3, we read about the one whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” If we immerse ourselves in the Word of God, then when suffering strikes, we can wield “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). If we’re immersed in the Word of God, when trouble comes, we won’t need to ask, “What would Jesus do?” because we will already know what Jesus would do.

Second, Christians need to be in prayer. As you will read in these pages, there have been many times in prayer while suffering that a Bible verse or idea has been quickened to us. While in prayer, we've seen passages that we have read for years in a new light. And of course, the Lord has granted many of our requests. James 4:2 says, "You do not have, because you do not ask."<sup>9</sup> That means that we need to do His will. If we don't do His will, we will be like any child—we won't want to approach our Father because our heart knows He has some things He wants to say that we won't want to hear. So keep a clear conscience and pray.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:6, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." To that I (Clay) say, "CASH IN!" Occasionally, when I've said that, some Christians have accused me of sounding too mercenary or reward oriented. But why not? Jesus told us that if we pray privately, our Father will reward us, and I want the rewards God offers, don't you? If the richest man in the world told you he'd reward you if you prayed or fasted without telling anyone, I'll bet the overwhelming majority of readers would give it a shot. Well, the Creator of the universe says, "Pray or fast, and I will reward you." Cash in!

Third, Christians need to be in fellowship. It's not enough to simply attend a Sunday service. We need to be in small groups or at least make sure we regularly see true Christian friends. When hardship occurs, we need to be able to rely on each other. After all, we can't do any of the following unless we're actually in regular fellowship with each other.

- "Love one another" and "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10)—the suffering need love and honor.
- "Instruct one another" (Romans 15:14)—the suffering often need to be reminded of scriptural truth.

- “Serve one another” (Galatians 5:13)—does someone need something repaired, or a ride?
- “Encourag[e] one another” (Hebrews 10:25)—who doesn’t need encouragement?
- “Pray for one another” (James 5:16)—that is helpful and may bring healing!
- “Show hospitality to one another” (1 Peter 4:9)—when Clay first had cancer, we loved it when people brought us meals.

We’ve known Christians who’ve withdrawn from fellowship when suffering struck. Three years ago, when I (Clay) found out I had metastasized cancer, I immediately called for the elders of my church to pray for me and anoint me with oil (James 5:14), and they were glad to do it. Frankly, the day they prayed I thought it possible that I might only live another six months, but here I am at the time of this writing without any symptoms caused by the cancer. I post about our odyssey on Facebook, and I’m thankful for the many people who respond and tell me they are praying for us. Further, I have a rather large mailing list of Christian friends, many of whom aren’t on Facebook, and I email them with regular updates and prayer requests. We love the support we receive from these posts and emails.

Many have shared how our openness about my struggles with cancer has encouraged their faith. Here is an example from social media: “It must seem surprising to a lot of folks that you both have so much confidence in God’s love and goodness during what is for most folks a terrifying and depressing situation. But your abiding trust makes perfect sense to some of us.”

Fourth, we’ve found that in times of suffering, keeping what we call a truth journal helps immensely. Our truth journals contain truths, Scriptures, and remembrances of God’s good care. Clay’s truth journal is a simple Word document with headings like “Truths to Remember,”

“Encouraging Scriptures,” and “Remembering How God Has Worked Out Good for Us.” Jean’s is more elaborate and is handwritten in a notebook. She has pages headed “Truths,” “Remembrances,” “Scripture,” “Prayers,” “Prayer Requests and Answers,” and “Good.” We both list the seven truths we’ll be discussing in the following pages as well as other truths we find helpful during hard times. We’ll talk more about how we use our journals in upcoming chapters.

One thing of which to be aware: If you are a true Christian but are not abiding in God’s Word, not praying, or not in fellowship, our Lord will often use suffering to drive you toward obeying His commands.

### WHERE’S GOD?

C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* answered well the question of why we don’t have more evidence for God’s existence, especially while suffering. Screwtape is a senior tempter who writes to Wormwood, a junior tempter, about how to tempt Christians. He refers to God as the “Enemy.” Screwtape writes to Wormwood: “You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Clay has written elsewhere, God gives enough evidence of His existence so that those who want to believe will have their beliefs justified but not so much that those who don’t want to believe will be forced to feign loyalty.<sup>11</sup> Lewis continues: “Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and more mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish, He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them,

or assimilate them, will not serve.”<sup>12</sup> And that’s where suffering comes in. The Lord doesn’t make His presence, His existence, too obvious. As Screwtape points out, and as we will be discussing shortly, it is during suffering that we grow into the kind of creature He wants us to be. Screwtape was correct to write: “Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”<sup>13</sup> Exactly. When we honor God through suffering, we threaten the devil and his angels. We will rightfully participate in their judgment.

### **WHAT TO DO NOW: PRAY FOR REVELATION OF THE GREATNESS OF YOUR SALVATION**

At the outset, we want to encourage you to pray that God gives you a revelation of the greatness of your salvation. Paul prayed for all the saints that God would do that in Ephesians 1:17-19:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (NIV).

We encourage you to pray this prayer and study the things for which Paul asks. A robust view of eternal life in Jesus will immensely help you face the hardships of this life victoriously and will help free you from worldly lusts.<sup>14</sup>

## THE BLESSINGS THE LORD HAS FOR OUR ETERNITY

If we continue to honor God through suffering, then we are victorious conquerors who will be glorified throughout eternity. Thus, shortly we will look at the blessings that the Lord has for our eternity, especially as laid out in the book of Revelation.<sup>15</sup> These are the blessings that the Lord promises to those who are victorious, who overcome, and who conquer.

But conquer, overcome, and be victorious over what? We need to conquer, overcome, and be victorious over suffering in its various forms: sickness, accidents, temptations to compromise, and persecution, even when these things might result in our deaths. But if we do conquer, if we do overcome, if we are victorious by honoring God despite whatever this fallen world throws at us, then we'll receive eternal blessings.

All these blessings climax with the promise of inheriting eternal life. And, of course, that resolves our deepest need. We need to know that we will not cease to exist at the death of our bodies, but that we are going to be welcomed into a wonderful life everlasting where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

Please note a couple of things about the phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7; see also 2:11; 2:17; 2:29; 3:6; 3:13; 3:22). This is a divine "Listen up!" said "to the one who conquers." All these messages culminate in a great heavenly blessing. True followers of Jesus will resonate with those blessings or warnings, but the spiritually apathetic will hear only, "He who has an ear, let him hear, blah, blah, blah." The unspiritual person will hear this as only some sort of religiously fantastical falderal. Even though true followers of Jesus may not understand all the Lord is saying in His Word—especially in the book of Revelation—they will still recognize that these blessings are significant and that something out of this world awaits them.



Let us remember that it is the Lord who created all the pleasures; Satan never created even one of them. As David wrote in Psalm 16:11, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Here on earth, it is the Lord who gives us pleasures like great food, wine, and sex. It is the Lord who makes orgasms possible. You may think we used the word *orgasms* to shock you. And indeed, we did! To shock you out of the satanically inspired stupor that heaven is a place you don’t want to be.<sup>16</sup> The Lord gives us those pleasures on earth, and if in heaven there isn’t sex as we now know it, then we should expect better things in its place. In fact, Christians sometimes ask if this or that favorite thing of theirs will be in heaven—cats, mountains, trains (a friend of ours really likes trains)—and the answer, again, is that if some of the things we really enjoy aren’t there, then we should expect better things in their place.

In response to Clay’s blog saying these things, a woman sent him a Facebook direct message:

What an impactful and convicting blog post! I have definitely fallen victim to the idea that perfection equals an absence of pleasure. I have also slid into the belief that heaven is a place of sterile holiness—I almost imagine a Catholic convent or something—in which I would struggle to fit. Your post really spoke to my heart and soul and has challenged me to get back into God’s word about heaven. I have allowed my human fear of death to negatively color this topic for too long. Seriously, I am so thankful...

She’s not alone. It’s the rare Christian who doesn’t have a dour view of eternity, and we seek in this book to help change that.

## TRUTHS ABOUT VICTORY IN SUFFERING

**M**y gynecologist's certainty gave me confidence. In a booming voice, incongruously deep for his small stature, he assured me that my baby was well, and I needn't be worried over an earlier miscarriage. So Clay and I joyfully celebrated the three-month milestone marking the pregnancy as safe.<sup>1</sup>

It seemed life was unfolding just as we'd hoped: We'd married, Clay had completed seminary, and soon after his graduation, he was offered an associate pastorate at a large church. With a baby on the way, we once again had reason to celebrate.

A week after that prenatal visit, we headed to a beach-front hotel for a church staff conference. After a laughter-filled dinner full of excited chatter and congratulations over expecting our first child, I excused myself and sleepily returned to the hotel room. There, sitting in a stark white bathroom, I stared in shock at a bright red streak.

*No, no—this couldn't be happening.*

The unfamiliar room, with its too perfectly arranged furniture and jarringly cheerful seascapes, amplified my disbelief. Mechanically, I crawled into the strange bed. I tugged at the cold sheet and foreign blanket, desperate for any bit of comfort, then pulled my Bible near.

“God, You know I’ve begged You to protect this baby,” I prayed. “God, please! I can’t cope with another miscarriage. Please heal my body and stop the bleeding. Please, don’t let me lose my baby.”

A couple hours later, Clay came in. He saw the anxiety in my expression and wrapped me in warm arms.

In the morning, we quietly drove home. By evening, labor began, and I fought with everything in me to stop it. But by daylight, the battle was lost.

Difficult years followed, as my dream of motherhood shifted from joyous hope to desperate pleading, to the grief of impossibility—and finally, to settled acceptance that it wasn’t to be. Looking back, I can see that contentment with childlessness was a journey with four major milestones. It began with changing what I mistakenly believed was a faith-filled response to difficulties.

## FOUR MAJOR MILESTONES

### *Milestone 1: Developing an “Open-Eyed” Faith*

Like many Christians, I’d memorized verses such as “All things work together for good” (Romans 8:28) and “Give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). When bad things happened, I’d quote these verses, express my gratitude that God would eventually make everything right, and push away my questions. Trying to trust God, I did something akin to closing my eyes, putting my hands over my ears, and saying, “La-la-la-la—just have faith—la-la-la-la.”

Giving thanks through the first miscarriage wasn’t as difficult because the pregnancy was unplanned. Clay was still in school, and I had a new job; I concluded it wasn’t the time for us to have children. The second miscarriage was different: We were ready to start a family, and I couldn’t identify any “good” that might result from our loss. Nonetheless, I quoted verses, thanked God, and made every

effort to stay positive. “It must be God’s will, so it’s fine with me,” I told my friends.

I thought I was doing well spiritually. At least, I didn’t feel angry with God. Actually, I didn’t feel anything toward God. That vaguely concerned me, but I wrote it off as emotional exhaustion.

Then one afternoon, I discovered that a houseguest had stacked my get-well cards out of sight. Furious, I wanted to scream, “How dare you move my things without asking me?” I grabbed the cards, slapped them on the coffee table, and sank into the sofa.

*What’s wrong with me?* I wondered. Slowly I realized I might be angry. And worse, I might be angry with God. *Is that even safe?*

I picked up my Bible and scanned the concordance for “anger.” Passages described God as slow to anger and full of understanding and compassion. *Perhaps it’s okay to tell God what I’m feeling.*

I went for a walk to be alone with God and came upon an empty schoolyard.

“God, I think I might be angry,” I prayed, stuffing my hands into my jeans pockets. “It’s possible that I might even be mad at You.”

A dried-out patch of dirt caught my eye. Its barrenness irked me: There should have been grass in that spot, not scraggly weeds. I kicked at a rock that was partly buried in the dirt.

“God, I *am* angry. How could You allow another miscarriage when I repeatedly told You that I couldn’t handle it?”

Emotion-charged words began to flow freely. I pressed God with every question: “I’m Your child—why did You let this happen to me?” I exposed every fear: “I won’t be able to enjoy a future pregnancy! And how can I face those church members who think my miscarriage was due to a lack of faith?” I expressed every hurt, particularly that I felt inadequate as a woman. And I listed every reason why I thought God should have intervened.

“Everyone else can have children—why can’t I?”

As soon as those words came out of my mouth, I knew I’d misspoken.

Many women cannot have children; some also have no husband. Then it hit me: I'd felt entitled to motherhood. This was the root of my anger. I felt God had denied me a "right."

I stepped into the street to avoid a row of oleanders, glancing at the glossy evergreens filled with clusters of red, pink, and white flowers. They bloomed almost year-round despite scorching temperatures, drought, and poor soil—the same soil that only a few steps back barely supported a scattering of weeds. *Is this what You want from me, God: to grow and blossom despite tough circumstances?*

Hesitantly, I began to thank God for His love and faithfulness—only a truly loving Father would allow His child to come beat on His chest. It was difficult at first, but I recognized that in His infinite wisdom, God had allowed a circumstance that would cause me to grow. While I still couldn't identify any specific good that would result from my loss, now I could acknowledge, by faith, that God would indeed work it out.

This change in me was subtle, but significant. In the past, whenever trials occurred, I closed my eyes to the problem, thinking it was good to shut out anything that might challenge my faith. But while closed eyes can't see problems, they also can't see God.

When I "opened my eyes"—presenting my problems and questions to God rather than hiding from them—I began to find answers and understand God better. As a result, my faith in God's goodness grew.

### ***Milestone 2: Choosing God's Will***

After the second miscarriage, my doctor boomed assurances that there was still nothing to worry about. I asked if there was a point at which having a child became less likely. He answered with too much finality, "After five sequential miscarriages, it's impossible."

A third loss soon followed. Avoiding my eyes, he ordered numerous tests. Weeks later, I sat eagerly at his desk, awaiting answers that would fix everything. Still evading eye contact, he said nothing had

been found except a low hormone that couldn't be replaced without causing birth defects. I'm not sure how I managed to reach the car before bursting into tears.

Reluctantly, I began to face that Clay and I might not have children. I felt I'd always meant it when I told God, "Thy will be done." And while I wanted to submit fully to God's will, I couldn't quite let go of my desire to be a mom.

One day, while asking God to help me surrender my will, I remembered another prayer from years before. As a young Christian, on realizing the totality of God's forgiveness, I'd prayed with immense gratitude, "God, if You never answer another prayer for me, that's fine. Salvation is enough."

Now I felt God whispering, "Did you mean it?"

Instantly, I was ready to answer. The miscarriages—even childlessness—were miniscule compared to the enormous and costly gift of salvation. Resolutely, I told God, "Yes, I meant it. Salvation is enough." When I chose God's will over my own, I took a big step toward contentment.

### ***Milestone 3: Seeking an Eternal Perspective***

Clay and I discussed adoption, but the cost was out of reach on a pastor's budget. Besides, what if God had a special ministry in mind for us? We ruled adoption out.

I wondered if my life could be fulfilling without children. As I searched the Bible and prayed, I realized that having children was not eternally valuable in itself, while having one's faith refined is of great value to all believers (1 Peter 1:6-8). God so valued my faith that He used the losses to expose and remove impurities, such as false beliefs and fear-based responses. Plus, by faithfully enduring hardships, I'd gain something forever valuable: an eternal glory that would far outweigh earthly losses (2 Corinthians 4:17). The more I grasped this eternal perspective, the more content I became.

### ***Milestone 4: Offering Sacrificial Praise***

At the fifth miscarriage, I mourned not only the loss of the baby, but the loss of ever bearing children. The lessons I'd learned were helping me to cope, but one question still stymied me. So I prayed, "God, Psalm 37:4 says if I delight myself in You, You'll give me the desires of my heart. I *am* delighting myself in You. I don't understand. Why aren't You giving me the desire of my heart?" Once again, I sensed a question to me: "What is the greatest desire of your heart?" My answer came with ease, "Following You, God."

At that moment, I realized all of life involves choosing between conflicting desires. Our choices reveal what we value most. I suddenly understood sacrificial praise (Hebrews 13:15) in a new way: choosing to praise and glorify God by relinquishing something costly. I wanted to offer sacrificial praise, but finding the words was hard, so I pictured my prayer.

I imagined placing my desire for children and the question "Why?" in a box. I wrapped the box with pale green paper and tied it with gold ribbon, then placed it at the foot of Jesus' cross, which shone softly through a dark night at the bottom of a hill.

I prayed, "This is my gift to You. On Resurrection Day, if You want to open this gift and show me 'Why?'—that's fine. And if You don't, that's fine too—I think answers won't be a priority when I'm overjoyed by being with You."

As the days went on, every time I hurt, every time I yearned, I brought this same picture to mind and prayed, "This is my gift to You." That picture and prayer brought me peace.

## **A QUESTION ABOUT SUFFERING TO WHICH EVERYONE WANTS AN ANSWER**

We started this chapter with Jean's story because it illustrates how younger Christians may grow through major suffering. We must learn

the subtle difference between a faith that relies on closing our eyes to problems and a faith that sees problems clearly while still trusting God.

For now, let us begin with the most common question about suffering: *Why does God allow so much suffering?*

Angels, cherubim, seraphim, the living creatures, and other heavenly beings must be appalled when they see us people on planet Earth: the depravities, diseases, disabilities, depressions, and deaths rampant among the inhabitants of our planet. These horrors were at one time completely foreign to them. Prior to Satan's rebellion, every creature was whole, was healthy, and had enough of everything; plus, no one ever died! But now the heavenly beings, like us here on earth, see the damage that sin has wrought.

Thankfully, though, *this life* isn't all there is. By *this life* we mean this earthly life, which—if you are a true believer in Jesus as Lord—is only the beginning of eternal life. In the kingdom to come, as it says in Revelation 21:4, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

As we mentioned in the preface, only one thing will prevent you from watching everyone you know die from murder, accident, or disease, and that will be your own death from murder, accident, or disease. So unless one dies young and suddenly, everyone is going to endure significant suffering. Indeed, some people are suffering much more than we think. We might think there are many people who aren't suffering much, but we often need to look deeper. Christina Onassis, heir to her father's shipping fortune, once said, “Happiness does not depend on money. Our family is the best proof of that.” She continued, “Since the death of my mother and my brother, we have learned how short life can be and with what terrible suddenness death strikes.”<sup>2</sup>

Clay often tells audiences that “God's plan A for your life is to take you through regular periods of suffering, and there is no plan



B.” That’s so true! In Philippians 1:29, Paul writes, “For it has been *granted to you* that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” Did you notice? Suffering has been “granted to you”! God is doing you a favor by allowing you to suffer for His sake. In John 16:33, Jesus says, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” In Acts 14:19, 22, we read that a mob stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, “supposing that he was dead.” But Paul soon rose up and then was “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Of course, as we age, we all begin to suffer various diseases. But Paul says that’s a good thing. Suffering is not incidental to being a Christian—it is integral, it is the plan, it has been “granted” to us, and the Lord expects us to respond to suffering in a God-honoring way in preparation for eternal glory. We’re sad for the countless Christians who think Christianity is about our having little to no suffering in life on planet Earth. But an easy life isn’t God’s plan for the Christian, and it has never been the plan.

Now, here’s good news. We’ve known Christians who were not spiritually reflective until suffering struck them or their loved ones, and then they poured the Bible into themselves. Suddenly, they read the Bible as if their lives depended on it (which they did—Matthew 4:4).

Our Lord does us a favor by allowing suffering to come into our lives. Just as human glory almost always comes through the suffering of hard work, eternal glory likewise comes through suffering. In fact, as was mentioned in the introduction, the word *glory* in the New Testament is regularly related to suffering (Luke 24:26; Romans 2:6-7; 5:2; 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Ephesians 3:13; 2 Timothy 2:10; Hebrews 2:10; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 5:1, 10).

In Romans 8:16-18, we encounter key verses about suffering. Paul writes,

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided* we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Paul is clear: We must “suffer with him” if we are going to inherit the kingdom and be glorified with Him.

### THE IRONIC NATURE OF VICTORY IN SUFFERING

How do we live victoriously while suffering? G.K. Beale, in his commentary on Revelation, writes, “‘Overcomers’ are those whose lives are characterized by refusal to compromise their faith despite the threat of persecution. They ironically conquer when they maintain their faith even though they may appear defeated in the world’s eyes.”<sup>3</sup> Revelation 5:1-3 gives us an example of this kind of ironic victory: “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it” (NIV).

Then, in verse 4, John tells us of his agony, “I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside” (NIV).<sup>4</sup> But in verse 5, we read, “And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’” What a relief! Jesus conquered and so is worthy to open the scroll.

But what John sees surprises him: “Then I saw a Lamb, as slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living

creatures and the elders.”<sup>5</sup> The conqueror John sees a “slaughtered” Lamb.<sup>6</sup> Not one lying dead but standing, very much alive. Beale explains,

The present victorious effect of the Lamb’s overcoming resides not only in the fact that the Lamb continues to “stand” but also in the fact that it continues to exist as a *slaughtered* Lamb...In addition to the resurrection, the defeat of death was itself ironically a victory for Christ. That is, Christ as a Lion overcame by being slaughtered as a Lamb.<sup>7</sup>

This is further illustrated by the fact that in His post-resurrection, glorified body, Jesus still bore His crucifixion wounds (John 20:25-27). Jesus isn’t ashamed of His crucifixion wounds for they memorialize what is certainly the greatest act of heroism in cosmic history. Even though Jesus was physically defeated, He is spiritually victorious.

There’s an amazing scriptural parallel to this passage in Revelation found in Romans 8. In Romans 8:35, Paul asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” In Revelation 5, Jesus the conqueror appears as a slaughtered Lamb. In Romans 8:36-37, Paul talks similarly about us Christians: “As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, *in* all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Notice again, that we are more than conquerors *in* all these sufferings, *not by going around them*. “More than conquerors” comes from the Greek words *huper* and *nike*. We get the English word “hyper” from *huper*. *Nike* (where Nike athletic wear gets its name) is translated in the New Testament usually as “be victorious,” “overcome,” or “conquer,”<sup>8</sup> and we will use those words interchangeably. The New American Standard Bible translates

*hupernike* as “overwhelmingly conquer.” As we honor God through suffering, whatever we face as Christians, we overwhelmingly conquer!

During World War II, Corrie ten Boom’s family hid Jews at their home in the Netherlands. Ultimately, Nazis discovered her family’s actions and sent her and her sister, Betsie, to prison camps. Their final camp was Ravensbrück. In her book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie writes about their time there. Betsie, who later died in Ravensbrück, read Romans 8—about our being more than conquerors—to Corrie and some of the other prisoners:

I would look about us as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. More than conquerors...It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it, we experienced it minute by minute—poor, hated, hungry. We are more than conquerors. Not “we shall be.” We are! Life in Ravensbrück took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory.<sup>9</sup>

And what do we overwhelmingly conquer? In Romans 8:35, Paul lists “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword.” *Tribulation* means “suffering or trouble, usually resulting from oppression”<sup>10</sup> and *distress* means “pain or suffering affecting the body, a bodily part, or the mind.”<sup>11</sup> These words taken together apply to any suffering or hardship that comes upon a Christian—disability, dementia, accident, COVID, cancer, abuse, betrayed relationships, and so on. *Persecution* refers to mistreatment and hostility. *Famine* literally means “an extreme scarcity of food.” *Nakedness* can mean “the state of being unclothed or stripped by force.” Many Christians have been stripped naked and raped or otherwise sexually molested. The sexual molestation of Christians has happened many

times from the time of the Roman Empire up to the current day. It's important to consider a hard truth: The Bible doesn't promise that we won't be stripped naked, raped, and tortured to death. Not only has that happened throughout the centuries, torture, rape, and murder of Christians still happens today. For example, while working for United Christian Ministries, 24-year-old Kayla Mueller was abducted by ISIS in Syria. Her captors pulled out her fingernails and made her a sex slave until they killed her two years later.<sup>12</sup> She remained faithful to Jesus. We must note, dear Christian, if you've been abused or sexually assaulted, whether as a child or an adult, nothing can happen to you in this life that will in any way diminish your eternity.

When it comes to tribulations and distresses, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:23-25 that he was often imprisoned, experienced countless beatings, and was "often near death." He says, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea." And then when it comes to danger, he writes in verses 26-27 that he was "in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." When it comes to the sword, it is very likely that Paul was beheaded by Nero.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus honored God through suffering. In John 18:11, when soldiers came to arrest Jesus and Peter impulsively cut off the ear of one of the men, Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (NIV). In other words, Jesus regarded all the horrific things that would soon happen to Him as part of the cup the Father had given Him, and He was going to do His Father's will regardless of how difficult it was. As D.A. Carson puts it, Jesus had a "firm resolution to accept what the Father gives him."<sup>14</sup> By

doing His Father's will, Jesus was victorious. Jesus conquered. Similarly, we need to drink from the cup the Father has given us, and as we continue to honor our heavenly Father through whatever suffering He allows in our lives, then we are victorious, we overcome, and we conquer. As mentioned earlier, Paul writes in Romans 2:6-7, "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." So let us seek glory, honor, and immortality!

A Roman triumph was a parade through the streets of Rome held in honor of the return of a victorious general. Harvard historian Mary Beard notes, "To be awarded a triumph was the most outstanding honor a Roman general could hope for."<sup>15</sup> In the parade, the general "would be drawn in a chariot—accompanied by the booty he had won, the prisoners he had taken captive, and his no doubt rowdy and raucous troops in their battle gear—through the streets of the city to the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline hill, where he would offer a sacrifice to the god."<sup>16</sup> It was the most lavish of all Roman rituals and was "celebrated more than three hundred times in the thousand-or-so-year history of the ancient city of Rome."<sup>17</sup> Triumphal arches celebrating the conquests of various generals remain in Rome, Algeria, Libya, Greece, and elsewhere.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, Paul likens us to being slaves on parade in a Roman triumph: "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." The world may smell defeat, but those of us in Christ are the fragrance of life.

Thus, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:10, "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (NIV). Are we getting this, dear Christian?

Hardship and persecution and difficulties are not our enemy. Worldliness is our enemy. A life of leisure is our enemy.<sup>18</sup> God uses hardships to make us the kind of person He insists that we become. David Garland explains that Paul's

conquest by God actually allows him to take part in God's triumphant march as one now reconciled to God. Paul's theology is remarkable for its sense of paradox. He suffers with Christ in order to be glorified with him (Rom 8:17, 37). Victory comes in defeat; glory, in humiliation; and joy, in suffering (Col 1:24). The wise must become fools to become truly wise (1 Cor 3:18); the rich one becomes poor so that the poor might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).<sup>19</sup>

So as you and I follow Jesus' example and honor God in suffering, we conquer, we overcome, and we are victorious. When we honor God through suffering, we become like the apostles whose lives were always threatened. We "become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men" (1 Corinthians 4:9). We're not talking about Stoicism here, where you're supposed to act like everything is okay even when you're really hurting. Christianity isn't about "keeping a stiff upper lip." We Christians can cry our eyes out and still honor God in suffering—we (Clay and Jean) have done that many times!

Earlier we mentioned that ISIS abducted Kayla Mueller in Syria and made her into a sex slave.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, here's an excerpt from a letter that Kayla wrote to her parents from prison:

I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator [because] literally there was no else...[And] by God [and] by your prayers

I have *felt tenderly cradled in freefall*. I have been shown in darkness, light [and] have learned that even in prison, one can be free...Please be patient[:] give your pain to God. I know you would want me to remain strong. That is exactly what I am doing. Do not fear for me, continue to pray as will I [and] by God's will we will be together soon. All my everything, Kayla.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that Kayla wrote that she “felt tenderly cradled in freefall.”

French journalist Nicolas Henin, who was held in the same prison as Kayla, reported about a meeting that he and four other journalists had with Kayla. Henin said that Kayla “spent several months in isolation, and she—but she was impressive...I mean, she was strong inside. She obviously had been through some tough moments, but she managed very well to overcome them.” When the Islamic British recruit and ISIS executioner called “Jihadi John believed that she converted to Islam[,] she said, ‘Oh, I just want to correct you: I did not convert.’ And, I mean, no one would dare to contradict him, but she did. That was not aggressive...she was just like that, very calm, but very decided.”<sup>22</sup>

Kayla conquered.

Six months after Kayla was captured, three other women were imprisoned with her. One of them said of Kayla, “She had a strong faith that gave her a lot of strength.”<sup>23</sup> Even when she had the chance to escape, Kayla put others first. A then thirteen-year-old Yazidi girl, who was a fellow prisoner, told Kayla that they were going to escape and asked Kayla to come with them. But Kayla “told me no, because I’m an American, if I escape with you they will do everything in their power to find you. It is better that you escape alone, I will stay here.”<sup>24</sup>

Again, Kayla conquered.

Does it seem impossible to you, dear Christian, that Corrie ten Boom would write that in Ravensbrück “the life we lived with God,



grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory,” and that Kayla Mueller could write from prison that she “felt tenderly cradled in freefall”? Then consider Richard Wurmbrand, cofounder of The Voice of the Martyrs, who himself spent 13 years in communist prisons. Wurmbrand was for three years kept in complete solitary confinement and was often tortured and mutilated, yet he wrote:

Often, after a secret service, Christians were caught and sent to prison. There, Christians wear chains with the gladness with which a bride wears a precious jewel received from her beloved. The waters in prison are still. They receive His kiss and His embraces, and would not change places with kings. I have found truly joyful Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison.<sup>25</sup>

“Truly joyful Christians” in prison? Corrie ten Boom, Kayla Mueller, and Richard Wurmbrand conquered.

So, dear Christian, let us commit ourselves to honoring God through whatever suffering the world and the devil throw at us, and we will be victorious conquerors who will be richly rewarded (much more about that in the final two chapters of this book).

## CLAY'S STORY

In 2002, I (Clay) started experiencing lower back pain.<sup>26</sup> As the months went on, the pain increased, and I visited different doctors, all of whom told me that I needed to do stretching exercises (that is the remedy for many people's back pain). But my pain increased and became so severe that I could no longer sleep in my bed upstairs with Jean (this was very sad to me). I couldn't sleep well downstairs either, but at least I wasn't waking up Jean. Finally, I got a CT scan on a Friday morning, and the next Monday morning I got a phone call from

my orthopedic surgeon. Not his nurse. Not an assistant. The doctor was on the phone, and I knew that meant it couldn't be good news.

The doctor told us (Jean was listening on another line) that I had "a mass" on my spine and that I needed to see a specialist who was located a long way from where we lived. After we hung up, I walked into Jean's home office and, with tears streaming down our faces, I thanked God for what He had allowed. At that moment, I knew that I had honored God in the face of extreme suffering, thus proving the sincerity of my faith. That didn't stop the tears (most of them in response to the prospect of me leaving Jean), but it did give me great comfort. My suffering had meaning. The heavenly host was watching, and I forced my mind to look to Jesus.

Then, the whirlwind began. Quickly I saw the specialist, who ordered a biopsy (which hurt, by the way). After the biopsy was done, we waited to hear the result. Finally, a few days later, my orthopedic oncologist told me that the lab diagnosed the biopsy as an aggressive form of cancer. First, he would treat it by chemo, and then, after six months or so, *if* the tumor shrank, he *might* opt to operate. But he also said he thought the biopsy results might be mistaken and he needed to see the slides himself. We were stunned. After we hung up, Jean and I met in the hallway. Again we held hands with tears streaming down our faces, and I led us in a prayer of thankfulness to God. Once again, I knew that I had demonstrated the reality of my faith to the Father and the heavenly host. I also knew that we had humiliated Satan.

I always emphasize the tears streaming down our faces because that's real—being faithful to God doesn't mean that we won't shed tears while we're being faithful. I forcefully chose to thank God regardless of my future on this earth, and that brought me a sense of honoring God amid great emotional and physical pain. That served as an anchor for our stormy lives.

As we said in the introduction, it's okay to mourn. Jesus says in

Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” In Philippians 2:26-27, Paul writes that his brother and fellow soldier Epaphroditus has “been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.”

Note a couple of things. First, Paul didn’t know whether God was going to heal Epaphroditus. Paul doesn’t say, “But I prayed for Epaphroditus and, of course, God healed him because it is always God’s will to heal.” Rather, Paul writes that God had “mercy” upon them both. In Paul’s mind it wasn’t a given that Epaphroditus would be healed. Second, Paul writes that if God had not healed Epaphroditus, then Paul would have had “sorrow upon sorrow.” It’s okay to mourn. Sadly, some Christians want others not to mourn—at least not for very long. But the mourning process for losing someone you’re close to, like a spouse, child, or parent, usually takes at least a year (or longer) because the person who has suffered the loss needs to experience every holiday, birthday, and so on at least once without their loved one’s presence. But again, we can honor God through our tears and mourning.

Three years ago, when we first found out that I had cancer again, this time metastasized, we cried that night and much of the next day. But we honored God through it. Even through the tears, we thanked God for the suffering He allowed into our lives.

But we’re thankful to report that the overwhelming majority of our days are rarely sad because, even as I have one procedure after another, we’ve learned to rely on seven truths to give us victory—the seven truths we will discuss in this book. We’ve found that when suffering strikes, regularly repeating and reflecting on these seven truths about suffering relieves our sadness and fears. We lived these truths in the past and we live them today. We can’t emphasize this enough: *We live these truths and have experienced how they have blessed our lives.*

Of course, sometimes things get us down. But when that happens, we have learned that it makes all the difference to think through the seven truths and figure out which one or more of them we've lost sight of. For example, sometimes I will think of a negative possible future outcome and then may quickly put it out of my mind, but it's still roaming around in my subconscious and bringing me down. I then need to figure out what's bothering me. Asking, as David does in Psalm 42:5, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" and then finding the answer makes a huge difference in our having peace and joy while suffering. If I realize that a negative possible future outcome is bothering me, then I recall that it may never happen (truth 5) and that even if it does happen, God loves us (truth 1) and He will work everything out for our good (truth 3).

Now, on to truth 1: God loves us.