

in the
valley
of the
shadow

Grief, Faith, and
the Transformative Work
of Suffering

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Contents

Introduction	9
1. On Suffering and Grief: Navigating the Inevitable	13
2. Reeling from Impact: Understanding Shock and What it Takes to Get Both Feet Back on the Ground	27
3. The Vessel: Why Your Worldview Is So Important	39
4. Help: Why It Is Vital to Invest in Your Relationships Now	49
5. Making Room for God: How to Get out of the Way	63
6. Tackling the Unthinkable: Traversing the Waters of Forgiveness	75
7. Regret: Facing Hard Things, Owning Them, and Letting Go	87
8. Loving Your Neighbor: A Closer Look at Our Jobs as Caregivers and Grievors	99
9. What Now? The Discipline of Simplicity	113
Conclusion: Looking to the Future	127
Voices from the Couch on Suffering and Grief	137
My Reflections	147
Notes	155

Introduction

*We never know what tomorrow holds, but we
know the One who holds tomorrow.*

Notes from the Bible of Barbara Lesslie

My life took a tragic and sudden turn several years ago. The shaping of my life post-tragedy is ongoing, and I expect the growth process to continue as long as I breathe. The concept of this book, though, existed in some form before that tragic day. As a mental health clinician, I journey with those who are trying to make sense of and do something with their suffering. I get to climb down into the sacred trenches of pain, and I have learned a great deal from that trench work.

Over the years it's become clearer to me that grief is a human conflict. And as a conflict, it is frustratingly unresolvable. Even if we are facing it head-on, we won't be able to negotiate it out of our stories or erase the loss. Instead, grief is something we must manage. But what we are managing at any given moment can evolve. Grief does not go away, but it changes form.

If grief has stages, I have yet to make sense of them. The word *stages* indicates discernible movement from one thing to the next. A progression. But I can't find a line between sadness and anger, or shock and acceptance. I can't find a clear path, and grief certainly doesn't come with a map. When wrestling with grief, it seems like everything and nothing makes sense at the same time. There are places in grief where the most precious human experiences emerge like bright light. There

are also dark places where even our own skin feels unfamiliar. Maybe it is this dynamic we need to explore: the relationship between the light and the shadow in grief. They are both real and woven together into the fabric of our earthly wrestling with loss.

My experience as a licensed professional counselor has taught me that there are no rules in grief. There is, unfortunately, no predictable timeline or roadmap for getting to the other side either. There is also no definitive picture of what the other side should look like. We do know that change is inevitable, however. More specifically, change is unavoidable. Change can happen instantly and come without invitation or consent. Grief, in part, is surviving the initial change that occurs with the impact of loss, wading through the ripples of damage, and, finally, settling into a new normal. This process has been reinforced in my personal life as well as my professional life. Now I travel alongside my family and friends as we grieve the tragic loss of my parents, niece, and nephew to a mass shooting. Our personal grief experience has also reinforced the idea that one of the most valuable parts of walking through grief is not getting to the other side, but honoring the value of every step. And I do mean every single step.

This is where the light and the shadow converge. They wrestle and dance in the now of every step we take in the journey of grief. If we submit to this awareness, our job becomes less about making sense of things and more about exposing ourselves to the surprises of this amazingly divine experience. The Christian experience of grief is particularly focused on hope, acceptance, and meaning. Where the light and shadow converge, there God is also. He is in it, holding us up, molding us into His image.

Words are a powerful catalyst. As a Christian I believe there is a treasured holiness to words that can breathe light into darkness. Part of what I do professionally is help others develop the language that

shapes their experiences because their words are that important. Creation begins with the words of God, and we are sustained through the gift of His Word to us in Scripture. We are also tasked with guarding and honoring our own words. We are made in His image, and our words are powerful indeed.

Many words have previously been written about suffering and grief. It is not my intention to reinvent the wheel, but to impart what I have learned through the words of others, and through the shaping of my own story. My hope is to help you explore and define your own experience in suffering. There is a section in the back of the book called “My Reflections” where you can write down your thoughts. If my words encourage you to seek God, find meaning, and reveal the depth of your experience amid life and loss, I am honored to play a part in that journey.

CHAPTER 1

On Suffering and Grief

Navigating the Inevitable

Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

Psalm 77:7-9 ESV

In random order of importance, I am a licensed professional Christian counselor, a mom, a sister, a business partner, a friend, a supporter of the arts, an adventurer, a Bible teacher for adults with special needs, a volunteer, an amateur bird enthusiast, a mountain lover, a wife, and a daughter. I am also someone lucky enough to have known who I am and who I want to be for as long as I can remember. Periods of struggle notwithstanding, I have faced life with the assistance of a solid sense of identity. God knit me together with His sovereign hands this way. He knew what was coming.

In April 2021, the property where my home rests was forever marred by something unthinkable. My neighbors, otherwise known as my parents, were killed along with my niece and nephew, and two HVAC workers who were working at the house. It was a beautiful spring day. It was a quiet, sunny, unremarkable afternoon. It was a shattering. A

mass shooting by a stranger. It happened in the sanctity and safety of their home. It was an undoing.

At the time of this writing, nearly four years later, those words still seem wrong. It is still surreal and jarring to acknowledge. Living through the shattering impact of trauma and then the long, slow voyage of grief has been the hardest thing I've ever done, and it has also gifted the most sacred blessings. There are inherent paradoxes in Christian grief. There is loss and gain. Anger and peace. Isolation and connection. Confusion and purpose. Anguish and grace. Reconciling these is part of the work we do when called to bear this particular cup. Weaving aspects of my personal story with my professional experience and my Christian faith through this book is one of the ways I am reconciling these paradoxes for myself. I recognize the chaos that is suffering and grief, and I am determined to try to forge a path of meaning through it.

Grief Accessibility

In the spring of 2024, when I was beginning preparations to speak at a Christian conference for young adults, a teenage girl asked me to speak on the topic of suffering. She made clear that she thinks her generation is hungry for not only recognition of their unique set of struggles, but tools to help them cope. Youthful resilience is not adequate for the task. Their age does not protect them from the condition of suffering that requires very grown-up responses. The fact that our world is in such a state that our children would ask to be educated on dealing with suffering is something to grieve on its own. She was right, though. Not only is our world dishing out suffering by the heap, but we are broadcasting every ounce of it to one another in real time. We not only have to hold our own experiences of suffering and grief, but we are also inundated with the global, regional, and individual sufferings of our neighbors. It is heavy.

This kind of grief accessibility is, like so much of our culture, complicated. There are benefits and drawbacks to being able to access the real-time stories of people all over the world. On the plus side, the intricate context that history books miss is being made complete before our eyes. We not only see world issues unveil, but we know how people from all sides are feeling and experiencing them. The telling of current events is no longer in exclusive hands, but in the hands of everyone via the internet and social media. We are getting a more complete picture of history in the making, of suffering, than ever before.

Often, because we hear of and read about them, we can respond to these stories. We can tend to what we can see. And now we can see just about everything. There is good here. The opportunities for intervention and ministry seem to be infinite and accessible. Because we have access to understanding the nuance of specific needs, beyond broad strokes, we can respond with more precision. From the comfort of our phones or desks, we can organize money, goods, and services across the world. Service opportunities have never been so advertised and diversified. This is also true on an interpersonal level. We might read about a tsunami on the other side of the world in the same minute our neighbor posts online about her catastrophic medical diagnosis. While there is certainly ample opportunity via the internet for deception and manipulation, our ability to respond to real need is acute and available.

The access we have to stories of suffering can also have a positive impact on our perspective. Grief and suffering have an isolating effect. These conditions tend to drive us into our own heads and homes, where it is easy to be convinced that we are alone and that our experience can't possibly be understood. We are in an information age that has transformed our ability to connect with those who share our life experiences no matter where they are. It is often so helpful to read about or talk to someone whose story mirrors our own. We can also gain

perspective by being exposed to stories that challenge our perceptions. These might be stories of hope when we are hopeless or help when we feel helpless. They might be stories of suffering that remind us of our blessings. The power of perspective cannot be understated, and making the world smaller through communication can impact the way we view our stories. Our ability to know about and respond to the needs of our communities is a blessing and a privilege.

It can also be overwhelming. As a mental health counselor, I deal with the impact of suffering and grief daily. A client showed up recently with an acute panic attack triggered by her inability to tend to the suffering in the Middle East. She was overloaded with guilt about not being able to respond to the hurt being broadcast across the news and social media. She felt unable to escape the constant thrum of need around her and across the world. I get it. The weight of community and global need is heavy, and responding to it gets trickier when it is competing for space with our own suffering and grief. On the flip side, the constant inundation of suffering can simply make us numb to the needs around us. The truth is, we simply can't personally attend to all the needs of the world or even those of our own communities or families. It is a humbling recognition that can lead to compassion fatigue even in the most fortitudinous of us.

The Looming Question

But here we are, engaging together in a journey about grief and suffering because we are struggling with pain. We are trying to figure out how best to tend to our pain and the pain of those around us. Right out of the gate, we can acknowledge that grief and suffering are complicated topics that bring up a lot of logistic and existential questions. I knew that when I spoke at the conference for Christian teenagers, I would have to address the one big question that tends to come up

whenever we talk about suffering and grief: Why? Why is the world like this? Why did this happen? If God is good, why is there pain? If God loves me, why won't He take this cup from me? Why is there suffering if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent? I cannot sufficiently answer this. What I am attempting to do, however, is break it down into ideas that can help us navigate this giant question: WHY?

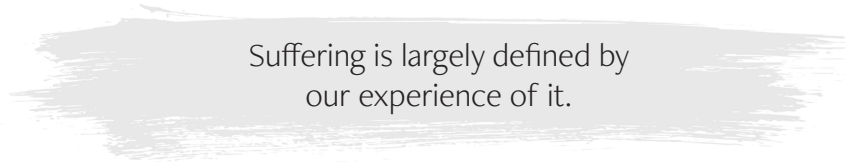
W: Who am I amid suffering?

H: How can I move through the world carrying this thing I now know?

Y: Yield to the movement of God.

Who Am I Amid Suffering?

First, who am I amid this pain? Suffering is largely defined by our experience of it. Who we are shapes the way we interpret our experience. Pain does not exist in a vacuum. In order to be felt, there has to be a collision; the pain has to land on something. And, unfortunately, you are the point of impact. When crisis happens, the results can range from discomfort to disfigurement (literally and figuratively). While the components of a crisis are typically out of our hands, we do have some control over the state we are in when it hits.

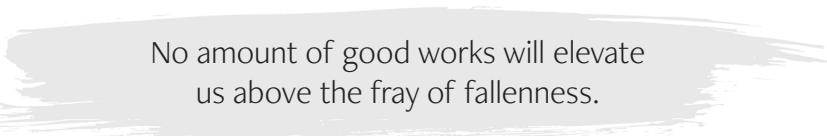


Suffering is largely defined by
our experience of it.

Some of the pieces that come together to build the foundation of self are culture, genetics, life experience, and environment. But I believe that the cornerstone upon which *self* sits is our worldview. Unlike so many factors that are out of our control, we get to participate in and

make choices about our worldview. It is an exercise in the understanding of identity. We have some power here. If we so choose, we get to actively engage in the process of determining what we believe. In chapter 3 of this book, I flesh out the idea of worldview in greater detail. For now, it is enough to conceptualize that the fullness of suffering and our reaction to it is in large part determined by the shape of its receiver.

The nature of living in a sinful world ensures that pain will happen in and around us. We are not promised a life free from suffering. No amount of good works will elevate us above the fray of fallenness. We cannot control the way it sometimes pours into our lives, wreaking destruction like a flood. While I am not suggesting that who you are, or your identity, determines how great or small your suffering is, I am suggesting that the foundation of self gives shape to your pain. It is the source from which you ascertain what has meaning, what is good or bad, what is valuable or worthless, and what is worth holding on to. These are fundamental tethers amid life's storms.



No amount of good works will elevate
us above the fray of fallenness.

How Can I Move Through the World Carrying This Thing I Now Know?

When the dust of our trauma begins to settle, and the clarity of the destruction declares itself, it is up to us to figure out what to do with the new landscape of our lives. How can I even begin to consider getting back to normal? What am I supposed to do when normal is no longer an option? Am I even capable of living in a way that will bring joy or fulfillment? How can I go out into a community that doesn't seem to

fit me anymore? Who am I after all this? How do I move through the world knowing what I now know about it?

Grief changes us. Studies show that grief not only impacts our mood and perceptions of the world, but can actually change our brains and physiology.¹ It can impact our cardiovascular systems every bit as much as it alters our sleep patterns and eating habits. We might be able to easily define or put simple words to our initial loss, but the ripples of grief extend far beyond the point of impact. It can be hard to recognize ourselves when the dust settles.

I often think of my life before grief as being characterized by certain privilege. Even though I cognitively knew better, there were people and experiences I took for granted. There were inconsequential things I elevated to important and important things I minimized so much they became unseeable. When challenged, I tried to pay attention to these maladaptive tendencies. But the comforts and busyness of life often got in the way of self-motivated challenge. We typically do not consider what we haven't been confronted by yet. We don't exactly ask for this kind of change. If you have experienced suffering, trauma, or grief, you understand the nonconsensual ripping away of comfortable ideas and ways of living. We are forced into knowing things we did not choose to know. In so many areas, we lose the privilege of comfortable ignorance.

To be honest, the human in me really doesn't want to know the things I now know about the world because of pain. Through my job and my own experience, my eyes are opened to a kind of suffering that I have a hard time making sense of. I don't see it all (thank you, Jesus) but I see enough to recognize the dark, heavy pull of the knowledge of what man is capable of. I am aware of an unthinkable depth of depravity, and also aware of our immeasurable capacity to absorb the pain it causes.

How do we move through the world knowing these dark and confusing things about it? Suffering with purpose requires a confrontation with this question. Surviving that confrontation is, in one sense, the journey of grief itself. Several chapters in this book tackle aspects of this exploration. What is important to note, though, is that asking ourselves this question is a *choice*. This is work we do not have to do. We can, instead, allow our pain to craft an entirely new set of blinders for us to hold on to. Confronting the *whats*, *hows*, and *whys* of grief and suffering is choosing to open our eyes wide to the truths of *who* and *where* we are.

Yield to the Movement of God

This brings us to the Y of WHY. What does it look like to yield to the movement of God? This question bears some consultation with theology. Rooted at the center is the discipline of trusting that God is who He says He is. This is not as easy as it reads (maybe discipline never is). This involves not just believing in the identity of Christ as the only Son of God and the source of our redemption but believing and behaving in a way that confirms that He is all the other things as well. Here is a list of some of the characteristics of God found in Scripture:

- God is a rock (Psalm 18:2).
- God loves you (Romans 8:38-39).
- God is kind (Psalm 145:8-9).
- God is all-powerful (Isaiah 44:6–48:11).
- God pays attention to even you (1 Peter 5:7).
- God is active (Hebrews 4:12).
- God cares about justice (Psalm 11:7).

- God delights in your well-being and happiness (Psalm 35:27).
- God is faithful (Deuteronomy 7:9).
- God is sufficient to meet your needs (Philippians 4:19).
- God is a shield (Psalm 3:3-6).
- God is sovereign (Matthew 10:29-31).
- God is creative (Genesis 1:1-31).
- God is everywhere, all the time (Jeremiah 23:23-34).
- God is mysterious (Ecclesiastes 11:5).
- God is merciful (Lamentations 3:22).
- God is eternal (Romans 1:20).
- God has a plan (Ephesians 1:11).
- God's plan is perfect (Psalm 18:30).
- God is always good (1 John 1:5).
- These aspects of God never change (Malachi 3:6).

What does it mean if I actively choose to believe that all these truths about God are accurate? For starters, it means that I am relinquishing control. I am humbly submitting to the idea that I don't and can't have all the answers. I am laying down my need to always know what the plan is (this one is difficult for me). I am beginning to yield to the movement of God.

If I choose to believe these things, it means that God really does have everything in His hands, including me. It means that those hands are loving, competent, and undefeatable. Not only that, but He sees me, He cares about me, and He is actively equipping me to navigate what is in front of me. He is that active and attentive. It seems like a

simple enough idea to grasp, until it involves actual, real-time submission. Here is where the rubber meets the road.

How do I submit to God when I don't understand what is happening? Submission in the face of the unknown feels counterintuitive. Acting and making decisions requires some form of situation assessment and understanding. How can I just relinquish my need to have answers when people are looking to me for a lifeline? Yielding means trusting that there is a plan and loosening our grip on the need for God to let us in on it. We are not bereft, though. In Scripture, through spiritual gifts and intentional pruning, He has already provided us with the answers and tools we do need to react to our circumstances. In chapter 5 of this book, I will dig deeper into what it looks like to get out of God's way and why it is important to make that a discipline.

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Free Will and Suffering

The issue of why God allows or tolerates suffering has been debated, dissected, and unpacked thoroughly in sermons, commentaries, books, articles, and on social media. There are exhaustive resources out there, and I don't profess to be the expert on this topic. Toward the advancement of the idea of yielding to God, I submit my best working understanding of how the allowance of suffering dances with our ability to survive it with insight and refinement.

Every day, we get to wake up and choose who to be. While it may seem like impulses, habits, compulsions, and muscle memory take over

many of our behaviors, we actually do have control over our choices. I would like to think that I wake up and choose good every morning. Odds are, if I don't put some energy behind it, I am not engaging in thoughts and behaviors that those around me might characterize as good. In fact, unless I am being vigilant to monitor and challenge my thoughts and behaviors, I hurt those who are unfortunate enough to dip into my orbit. And that is all it takes. I've done it. I put the very thing into the world that I spend my professional life fighting. I am a catalyst for suffering.

Why does God let me do this? Why does He allow me to make these choices? If a byproduct of free will is pain, why doesn't God take away my ability to choose? If we can agree that suffering is, in part, a consequence of human choice, then the question becomes, Why does God care so much about choice? If God is willing to tolerate and allow suffering in order to protect my ability to choose, what does that say about choice itself?

Let's circle back to what we believe about who God is. If we believe that God's plan is intricate, perfect, and complete, this dance between free will and suffering has to be part of the plan. If He created space and time to fit flawlessly together for His glory and perfect expression of love, surely our individual and collective gifts of free will are an intricate piece of the story. It is a struggle for me to look at my own pain and the suffering of the people I love and make sense of it. Is my ability to choose worth the price of the suffering I cause? The suffering I see? Is giving people choice worth the depth of the pain I have felt? Is it really worth the ultimate suffering Christ experienced on the cross? Free will costs so much. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis states:

If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God

give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.²

God is good. And all-powerful. And all-knowing. He sees everything, including me. He sees how my yesterdays and tomorrows intertwine with eternity. He saw these things when He breathed the universe into existence. He knows every tear I have shed and every piece of me that has shattered. He has seen the destruction my hands have wrought. And still, He lets me choose. In fact, my ability to choose must be so valuable to my God that He is willing to allow me to suffer for it.

I am not suggesting that the only purpose of suffering is to facilitate free will. I try not to put God in neatly constructed boxes like that. I am, however, recognizing that there is a definite relationship between free will and suffering. That relationship indicates there is something major at play. It points to our ability to choose with an exclamation mark! When viewed through this lens, choice itself becomes vital. Critical. Life or death, even.

This is where I am found, on my knees, engulfed by what feels like unsurvivable pain. My hands feel inadequate to hold anything securely, and yet I am still reaching for something to anchor me. If I look or listen hard enough, there is light. While I might not be able to see it clearly, there is hope and promise in the light. All I need to do is choose it. I don't even have to know what that choice means in the moment. Choose it now and choose it again in the morning. I might have to renew my choice by the hour. By the minute. Something profound happens when we actively and intentionally choose God. You are choosing to engage with that idea simply by reading this book.

These three WHY ideas will hopefully help us understand more about how to think about suffering and grief as we work through it.

Who am I amid suffering? *How* can I move through the world carrying this thing I now know? How can I *Yield* to the movement of God? The rest of this book is dedicated to dissecting these ideas further toward the ultimate goal of empowering us to choose Him, especially amid suffering and grief. I hope what you find in the following pages makes that choice easier.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you balance the needs and sufferings of the world with your own? How well do you tend to both aspects of grief, others' and yours?
2. What has surprised you about grief?
3. In what areas of your suffering are you holding tightly to control instead of trusting in God's provision?