

SURPRISED
BY SUFFERING:
THE ROLE OF PAIN AND
DEATH IN THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE

R. C. SPROUL



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*For Alissa Erin Dick,
stillborn infant,
until we meet in heaven*

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PREFACE

Those of us who live in Western nations are blessed to a degree previous generations would never have believed possible. For the most part, we enjoy good health, comfortable lifestyles, and security. We do not face imminent threats each day to our existence or even our sense of well-being.

These blessings, however, tend to lull us into a false sense of invulnerability. When we are spared from difficulties over time, we begin to expect that we will always escape hard things. Therefore, if suffering in any of its various forms—disease, injury, grief, loss, persecution, failure—comes upon us, it tends to catch us by surprise. Thus the title of this book.

My purpose in writing this book is that you would *not* be surprised when suffering comes into your life. I want you to see that suffering is not at all uncommon, but also that it is not random—it is sent by our heavenly Father, who is both sovereign and loving, for our ultimate good. Indeed, I want you to understand that suffering is a vocation, a calling from God.

This book was first published in 1988. This new edition features a new chapter on God's sovereignty in relation to suffering (Chap. 4), as well as new Scripture and subject indexes.

It is my prayer that God will use *Surprised by Suffering* to prepare you for whatever valley the Good Shepherd may call you to tread, knowing that He Himself will go with you.

—R. C. Sproul
Lake Mary, Florida
June 2009

PART ONE

Unto Death

CHAPTER ONE

SUFFERING, PERPLEXITY, AND DESPAIR

Christians are those who have faith in Christ. We all aspire to possess a faith that is strong and enduring. The reality, however, is that faith is not a constant thing. Our faith wavers between moments of supreme exultation and trying times that push us to the rim of despair. Doubt flashes danger lights at us and threatens our peace. Rare is the saint who has a tranquil spirit in all seasons.

Suffering is one of the most significant challenges to any believer's faith. When pain, grief, persecution, or other forms of suffering strike, we find ourselves caught off guard, confused, and full of questions. Suffering can strain faith to the limits.

Paul wrote poignantly about his own struggles in times of distress: "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (2 Cor. 4:8–10).

The apostle said he was “hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed.” He made no attempt to mask his pain in a fraudulent piety. The Christian is not a Stoic. Neither does he flee into a fantasy world that denies the reality of suffering. Paul freely admitted the pressure he experienced.

We all know what it means to be hard pressed. We use the word *pressure* to describe tense moments in our lives. Troubles in our jobs, troubles in our marriages, and troubles in our relationships can mount up and attack our spirits. If we add the tragic death of a loved one or the difficulty of a prolonged illness to these daily pressures, we feel the pain of being hard pressed all the more.

To be hard pressed is to feel as if we are used automobiles that have been consigned to the junk heap and put in a metal compactor. To be hard pressed is to feel a massive weight that threatens to crush us.

When we experience severe heartbreak, we may be inclined to say, “I’m crushed.” But this is hyperbole. We may feel crushed; we may even come close to being crushed. But the bold declaration of the apostle is that we are *not* crushed.

We speak of “the straw that breaks the camel’s back.” I once heard this expression used while attending a Weight Watchers gathering. At the initial meeting for orientation, everyone was given several items, including a food guide, a daily chart for recording what we consumed, an exercise booklet, and a drinking straw. As we neared the end of the meeting and the instructions for the program were completed, the instructor asked, “What made you decide to join Weight Watchers?” Several members of the group volunteered answers. Each person had a different reason: some had seen themselves in recent photographs and couldn’t stand the sight; some had had to purchase clothes one size larger; and some had been told by their doctors to lose weight. After this discussion, the instructor held up a drinking straw. “This is your last straw,” she said. “This straw represents the reason you decided to join the program. Take it home and put it in a prominent position. Tape it to the refrigerator. When you falter in your desire to lose weight, look at it. Let it serve to remind you of why you are here.”

I doubt a camel’s back has ever been broken by a drinking straw. The

metaphor had its origin in the Middle East, where camels are still used as beasts of burden. The camel is expected to carry straw that is harvested. There is a limit to how much straw a camel can carry. Every camel's back has a breaking point. The difference between a tolerable burden and one that crushes may be a single piece of straw.

I don't know how much straw a camel can carry. I don't know how heavy a burden I can carry. We all have a tendency, however, to suppose that we can carry far less than we actually can.

"MY BURDEN IS LIGHT"

There have been times in my life when I have uttered foolish prayers. When I have been hard pressed, I have cried out to God: "This much and no more, Lord. I can't handle another setback. One more straw and I'm finished." It seems that every time I pray like that God puts a fresh load on my back. It is as if He answers my prayer by saying, "Don't tell *Me* how much you can bear."

God knows our limits far better than we do. In one respect, we are very much like camels. When the camel's load is heavy, he doesn't ask his master for more weight. His knees get a bit wobbly and he groans beneath the burden, but he can take on more before his back will break. The promise of God is not that He will never give us more weight than we *want* to carry. The promise of God is that He will never put more on us than we *can* bear.

Note that Paul did not say, "We are *lightly* pressed on every side." He said that we are *hard* pressed. At first glance, these words seem in direct conflict with the promises of Christ. Jesus said: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

It does not always seem to me that the burden Christ gives us is light. With these words, it almost seems as if Jesus approaches us under false pretenses. But His words are true. He *does* give rest to those who are heavy

laden. The words *easy* and *light* are relative terms. *Easy* is relative to a standard of difficulty. *Light* is relative to a standard of heaviness. What is difficult to bear without Christ is made far more bearable with Christ. What is a heavy burden to carry alone becomes a far lighter burden to carry with His help.

It is precisely the presence and help of Christ in times of suffering that makes it possible for us to stand up under pressure. It was because of Christ that Paul could triumphantly declare that though he was hard pressed, he was not crushed. We may feel like junked automobiles in a metal compactor, but Christ stands as a shield to prevent the pressure that comes upon us from crushing us entirely.

To suffer without Christ is to risk being totally and completely crushed. I've often wondered how people cope with the trials of life without the strength found in Him. His presence and comfort are so vital that I'm not surprised when unbelievers accuse Christians of using religion as a crutch. We remember Karl Marx's charge that "religion is the opiate of the people." He was referring to opium, a narcotic used for dulling the effects of pain. Others have charged that religion is a bromide used by the weak in times of trouble.

Several years ago, I had knee surgery. During my recuperation, I used crutches. I used them because I needed them. Likewise, years earlier I was in the hospital for another operation. After surgery, I was given painkilling drugs every four hours. I recall watching the clock during the fourth hour, eagerly awaiting the moment when I could push the call button for the nurse to get another dose. I was grateful for the painkillers, just as I was grateful for my crutches years later.

I am far more grateful for Christ. It is no shame to call on Him for help in times of trouble. It is His delight to minister to us in our time of pain. There is no scandal in the mercy of God to the afflicted. He is like a Father who pities His children and moves to comfort them when they are hurting. To suffer without the comfort of God is no virtue. To lean upon His comfort is no vice, contrary to Marx.

SURPRISED BY SUFFERING

Paul added, “We are perplexed, but not in despair.” Perplexity often accompanies suffering. When we are stricken with illness or grief, we are often bewildered and confused. Our first question is “Why?” We ask, “How could God allow this to happen to me?”

I remember the story of a distraught father who was deeply grieved by the death of his son. He went to see his pastor, and in his bewildered anger he asked, “Where was God when my son died?” The pastor replied with a calm spirit, “The same place He was when *His* Son died.”

There is an element of surprise connected to suffering. We learn early that pain is a part of life, but the learning process is usually gradual. I am amused by the way my three-year-old grandson handles pain. When something hurts him, he declares, “Pap-pap, I have an ‘ouch.’” He uses the word *ouch* as a noun. If his “ouch” is slight, a simple kiss will make it disappear. If it is more severe, he asks for an “andbaid.”

Most childhood illnesses and bruises are minor. When a child gets a stomach virus, he usually doesn’t worry about cancer. He learns quickly that the discomfort of a childhood illness is soon over. As adults, however, we move into another level of disease and pain. Though we move through stages of preparation, we are never quite ready when we are afflicted with a more serious illness.

I remember my daughter’s first visit to the hospital. She was six years old and had to have her tonsils removed. As parents, we went through all the steps of preparing her and shielding her from what was coming. We read her the children’s books about going to the hospital. We assured her that after the operation she would be allowed the treat of her favorite ice cream.

The trip to the hospital was an adventure. The pediatric wing of the hospital was brightly decorated. The nurses entertained our daughter and her roommate with toys. Her spirits were high and apprehension was at a minimum.

When the girls were taken into surgery, we awaited their return from

the recovery room. I will never forget the vision of my daughter when she looked at me after she had awakened. She was a pitiful sight. Dried blood was crusted at the edge of her lips. Her face was ashen. But what was most haunting was her look of fear, shock, and betrayal. She was experiencing a new threshold of pain. It was as if she was saying to me with her eyes: “How could you? You knew it would be like this and you lied to me.” The last thing she cared about at that moment was ice cream. She was surprised by her pain, for it was not what she expected.

I am sure my daughter had the same questions about me as we do about our heavenly Father when sudden pain is thrust upon us. Like my daughter, we are often surprised that God allows such deep affliction to befall us. The surprise stems not so much from what God leads us to believe but from what we hear from misguided teachers. The zealous person who promises us a life free from suffering has found his message from a source other than Scripture.

In fact, Scripture admonishes us *not* to think that it is a strange or unusual thing that we should suffer. Peter wrote: “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12–13). These words echo Paul’s statement about “filling up what is lacking” in the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24), a curious affirmation that we will look at more closely in the next chapter.

Peter adds these words: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Peter 4:15–16). When the criminal suffers for his crime, he may be distressed, but he has no reason to be perplexed. There is no surprise that punishment should be the consequence of crime. There is shame attached to this sort of suffering.

To suffer as a Christian carries no shame. Peter concludes: “Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19). Here, Peter erases all

doubt about the question of whether it is ever the will of God that we should suffer. He speaks of those who suffer “according to the will of God.” This text means that suffering itself is part of the sovereign will of God.

Earlier in his epistle, Peter spoke of the fruit of our suffering:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6–9)

This passage shows how it is possible to be perplexed but not in despair. Our suffering has a purpose—it helps us toward the end of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls. Suffering is a crucible. As gold is refined in the fire, purged of its dross and impurities, so our faith is tested by fire. Gold perishes. Our souls do not. We experience pain and grief for a season. It is while we are in the fire that perplexity assails us. But there is another side to the fire. As the dross burns away, the genuineness of faith is purified unto the salvation of our souls.

DESPAIR AND THE DESIRE TO DIE

It is when we view our suffering as meaningless—without purpose—that we are tempted to despair. A woman who endures the travail of childbirth is able to do it because she knows that the end result will be a new life. But not all of those who are terminally ill have the same hope of a good result as those giving birth to a child. If death is the end, the suffering that attends it *should* drive us to full and final despair.

However, the message of Christ is that death is not unto death but unto life. So the analogy of childbirth applies. In fact, it is used to describe the

suffering of Christ and of the whole creation. Isaiah wrote, “He shall see the labor of his soul and be satisfied” (Isa. 53:11). Likewise, Paul told us: “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:22–23).

We may be perplexed, but we should not despair. The pain of suffering in itself would be enough to drive us to despair were we not persuaded of the redemption that lies before us.

Still, even that redemption is not always enough to keep us from approaching the rim of despair. Scripture repeatedly reveals the struggles of the greatest saints with the problem of despair. More than one biblical figure cursed the day of his birth and pleaded for the privilege of death.

Moses faced the dark night of the soul when he cried out to God: “If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!” (Num. 11:15). Job cursed the day of his birth, saying: “Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest” (Job 3:11–13). Jeremiah expressed the same sentiment: “Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! Let the man be cursed who brought news to my father, saying, ‘A male child has been born to you!’ making him very glad. . . . Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?” (Jer. 20:14–15, 18).

It is when suffering lingers that we are pushed to these depths. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once remarked that one of the worst states a human being can face is to want to die and not be allowed to do so. I have personally encountered people in this condition. Many elderly people have said to me: “I wish the Lord would take me. Why does He make me linger?”

DEATH WITH DIGNITY?

The deep desire to be released from suffering lies at the core of the issue of euthanasia. It is argued that we are more humane to animals than we are to people. We shoot horses and we put our dogs to sleep, but we maintain human life as long as possible.

Historically, both the church and the medical profession (following the Hippocratic Oath) have followed the maxim that we ought to do everything possible to sustain life. But with the advent of modern techniques, it is now possible to keep people technically alive beyond the scope of any possible hope for recovery. Thus, modern technology has introduced severe moral dilemmas into the matter of dying.

It must be said that God does not permit us to commit suicide. Suicide, in its fullest expression, involves a surrender to despair. (This does not mean that suicide is the unpardonable sin. People commit suicide for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of conditions. We don't really know the state of mind people are in when they do it. We leave the question of the fate of suicide victims to the mercy of God.) Whatever the complexities of suffering, we know that we are not given suicide as an option for death.

In the debate over euthanasia, distinctions are made between *active* and *passive* euthanasia. Active euthanasia involves taking direct steps to kill a suffering person. This includes such procedures as lethal injection. Simply stated, passive euthanasia involves the cessation of the use of extraordinary life-support methods. Passive euthanasia is sometimes known as "pulling the plug" or "allowing nature to take its course." Here the issue of dying with dignity becomes paramount.

I once was asked to address a convocation of eight hundred physicians on the issue of "pulling the plug." The doctors were acutely aware of the problems. How should the plug be pulled? Who should pull the plug? When should the plug be pulled?

When we consider the various means by which life can be artificially sustained, it becomes clear that there are many ways to "pull the plug."

IV tubes can be removed, allowing a person to starve to death. Respirators can be turned off. Medication can be stopped. When these steps are taken, the line between so-called active and passive euthanasia quickly becomes blurred. Likewise, the difference between *ordinary* and *extraordinary* means of life support is not always clear. Yesterday's extraordinary means becomes today's ordinary means.

The problem is complicated by the question of *who* makes the decision. The doctor doesn't want to play God. The family can be crushed by guilt surrounding the decision. No pastor feels adequate to the task, and it is terrifying to leave the issue in the hands of the legal community. Yet decisions in these matters have to be made daily in hospitals all over the world. Not to make a decision is to make a decision.

I don't have all the answers to this dilemma, but I am sure of two things. The first is that the issues must be decided in light of the overarching principle of the sanctity of human life. We must bend over backward to insure the maintenance of human life. If we err, it is better to err in favor of life rather than to cheapen it in any way. Second, the decision must involve three parties at least, perhaps four. It must involve the physicians, the family, the clergy, and when possible, the patient.

This issue is part of the perplexity of suffering. At all costs, the decisions we make must not be made from a point of view of despair. At all times, we must keep the goal of redemption in mind lest hope be swallowed up by despair.

As I noted above, the only way to avoid despair is to place our faith in Jesus Christ for the salvation God provides. David summed up the matter: "I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (Ps. 27:13). Likewise, the apostle Paul, in the same epistle in which he said, "We are perplexed, but not in despair," also wrote:

We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia; that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in

ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us. (2 Cor. 1:8–10)

Paul entered into despair. But his despair was limited. It was not ultimate despair. He despaired of his earthly life. He was sure that he was going to die. But Paul did not despair of the ultimate deliverance from death. He knew the promise of Christ for victory over death.