



# SUFFERING WELL

*Understanding God when I need Him the most*



by Richard Borg

**N**ever thought of “suffering well,” right? Neither did I at one time. We don’t associate “well” with suffering, and suffering is never compelling.

Suffering well has nothing to do with self-denial (asceticism) or pleasure (masochism). Followers of Jesus Christ are typical humans; we avoid suffering and desire to end it as soon as possible. But in a fallen world, suffering is unavoidable.

Like the menu of an ice cream parlor, suffering comes in many flavors and portions. Some are small and momentary and soon forgotten. Others are enormous and severe, lasting a lifetime. Some sufferings are caused by others. Some are self-inflicted. Still others have no identifiable cause; they just happen. The curse of sin and suffering runs rampant through our lives.



Suffering is also like a refiner's fire, which brings to the surface and exposes our moral impurities and character flaws. In suffering we also discover the true depth of our faith and our understanding of God Himself.

### **GROWING TRUST**

Remember the parable of the soils and seeds Jesus taught? He explained to His disciples that the seed is God's Word and the soils are the hearts of people (Luke 8:11-15). The second seed did not endure and "fell away in the time of testing" because "it had no root" (v. 13). The third seed was "choked by life's worries" and "did not mature" (v. 14).

Some people who think they are followers of Jesus fail in the refiner's fire. When I hear them say in their suffering, "Why did God do this to me?" I cringe. When they can't get past blaming God, who is never blameworthy, their faith gets stuck and begins to shrink. Perhaps you know someone who did not suffer well.

Only the fourth seed of God's Word endures because "the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15). Those with a noble heart have faith which prevails, and their trust in God grows even stronger in suffering.

### **MY STORY**

My first experience of severe suffering came early in my life at age 10 when my mother lost her three-year battle with cancer in 1955. In her last painful months at home, I witnessed things a 10-year-old boy should not have heard or seen.

One August morning Dad gathered us in the living room to tell us that Mom went home to be with Jesus during the night. Along with my father and two older brothers, we were devastated. The absence of her free-spirited nature and warm Christian faith left a huge vacuum in our hearts that only God could fill. I especially felt the pangs of loneliness and abandonment when at the end of every school day I was the first to enter our empty house.

Not long after, my father remarried. Isabel didn't know how to cook. But she dearly loved my father, having taken on the burden of mothering and cooking for three hungry teenage boys. She was a true saint.

Sadly, three months before I married my wife in 1965, Isabel also lost her painful battle with cancer, and we all grieved again. Fortunately, for my brothers and me, our dad, mom, and step-mom suffered well. Their faith and hope in God their Savior remained strong for us and others to observe.

### **WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE**

In the late spring of 2013, I saw blood in my urine and suspected the worst. During the weeks before and many



◀ Richard Borg (far left) was 10 years old when his mother (center) died of cancer.

▲ Richard and his step-mom, Isabel

months following bladder cancer surgery, I entered my own "dark night of the soul" or "the valley of the shadow" as I called it. It was now my turn to renew my own understandings of God when I needed Him the most. What I had shared with others during my years of pastoral ministry, I now needed to embrace for myself.

Along with the memories of painful deaths in my family as well as the memories of many others I stood by, I needed to trust God in the midst of my own depression and fear. I was not afraid to die—it was the *how* of it that disturbed me the most.

As I met with God daily and meditated throughout each day on the very words He spoke about Himself, I slowly entered a depth of intimacy with Him I didn't know existed. I had heard such testimonies from others but was never sure it could happen for me. It did.

I entered a place in my innermost being of rest, peace, and even joy at times. I experienced deep in my soul an unexplainable presence of God's Spirit—nothing audible or visible but a real sense that I was not alone. This went on for months. No family member or friend could touch me that deeply. »



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with understanding well  
and experiencing well  
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ways of God Himself.*

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▲ Richard and Sharon Borg married in 1965.

One day I blurted out to my daughter, Amy, "I now have more to die for than to live for." I couldn't believe I said it, but it was true. It didn't matter to me anymore whether I lived or died. I discovered what others before me had described.

Suffering well begins with understanding well and experiencing well the loving nature and ways of God Himself. David, the shepherd, understood God well in these familiar words: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you [God] are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Ps. 23:4). God was "with" David. And like the shepherd's rod and staff that administer care and protection to the sheep, David experienced Divine comfort in his "valley of the shadow." So did I, and so can you.

#### **BETTER STORIES**

The Scriptures are filled with better stories of those who suffered well. For instance, when the risen Christ appeared to Ananias in Damascus to tell him he was to

host Saul (apostle Paul), who had persecuted Christ followers, Jesus told him, "I will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

The record of Paul's sufferings for the sake of the gospel is legendary. He suffered on many levels and ways too numerous to mention here. But one suffering was a chronic physical problem Paul asked the Lord three times to remove. The Lord's answer was "no." Why? He said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

God's grace leads to His power, and His power leads to His glory when you suffer well. Your suffering is God's opportunity to display His glorious power in you when you pursue Him and understand Him well.

But the greatest story of suffering well is the Suffering Servant of God the Father—the Lord Jesus Christ. The sufferings of Jesus cannot be measured or exaggerated from His Incarnation to His cross. His earthly life and death perfectly fulfilled God's plan for the salvation of mankind. On the highest level, no suffering could be greater for any greater purpose or greater glory. So much so that "... the





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glory of God . . . and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev. 21:23) will light up heaven for eternity.

### **DO YOU SUFFER WELL?**

Sufferings provoke many emotional responses from loneliness to fear to hopelessness to shame and sadness, to name a few. How you respond to God in the midst of these powerful emotions determines how well, or not so well, you suffer. What you understand about God’s nature and ways will prepare you for suffering when you need Him the most.

Here are several examples among many:

- God’s presence when I feel alone
- God’s sovereignty when I feel afraid
- God’s peace when I feel hopeless
- God’s mercy when I feel ashamed
- God’s joy when nothing makes me glad

Simply put, God Himself is your strength to overcome every natural and unhealthy emotion suffering provokes in you. These understandings of God, along with others, will start and keep you on the path toward Him on the journey of suffering. Don’t wait till suffering begins before you understand God’s loving nature and ways, or your journey will take that much longer.

Understanding God well releases you from self-absorption and self-pity. You know you are suffering well when you can truly pray, “Lord, whether my pain ends in this life or the next, I surrender to Your grace. Release Your power perfectly in my weakness for Your glory alone.” ■



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