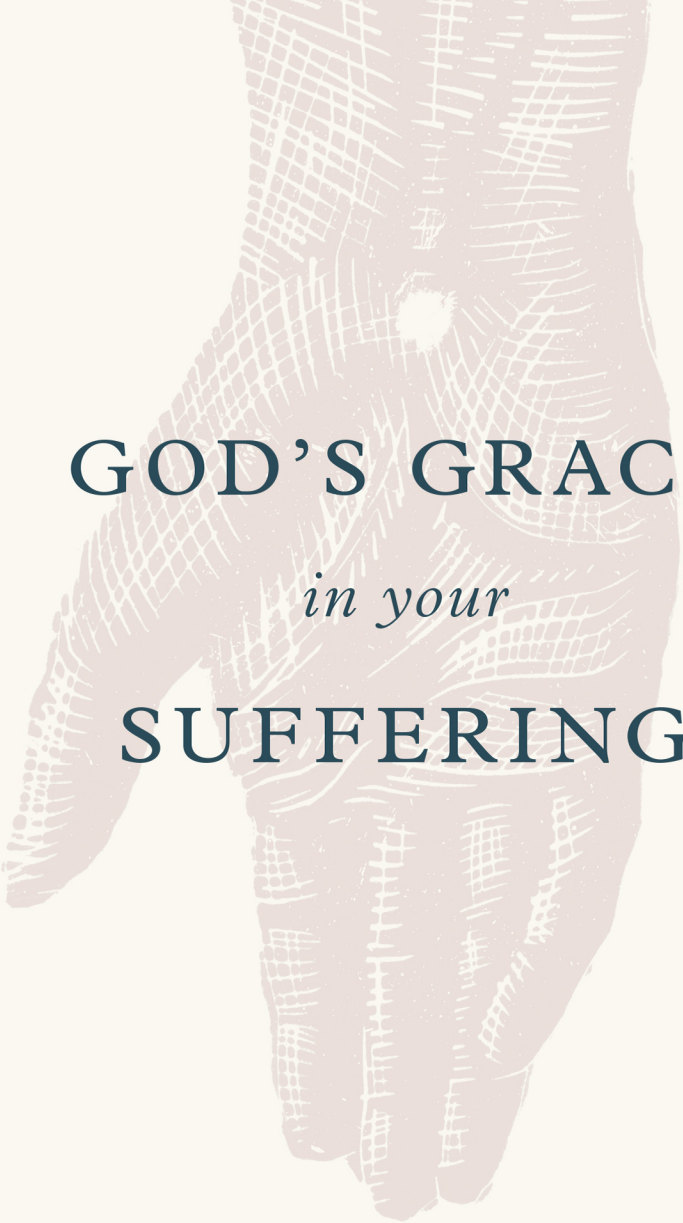

# GOD'S GRACE *in your* SUFFERING

*DAVID POWLISON*

"Whenever my friend David Powlison offers insights on handling hardships, I listen. Far from dispensing ivory-tower platitudes, David takes anchors from Scripture and bolts them firmly into our thinking, providing practical steps in embracing the God of the Bible, who, incidentally, wrote the book on suffering. David's wisdom has helped me through a significant portion of my years as a quadriplegic, and I highly commend *God's Grace in Your Suffering*. What a great guide for those who, every day, journey the hard, bloodstained path to Calvary."

**Joni Eareckson Tada,** Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

"Sometimes navigating the advice of others while in the midst of suffering can be an added trial. Powlison puts all of that to rest by giving readers the gospel—showing them the firm foundation of the Word. He puts the compass of God's Word in our trembling hands and points us to true north: Christ himself."

**Gloria Furman,** coeditor, *Word-Filled Women's Ministry*; author, *The Pastor's Wife*

"Tender, refreshing, and thoroughly biblical, *God's Grace in Your Suffering* is a cup of cold water for those in the desert of suffering. Writing from the perspective of both a fellow sufferer and a wise counselor, Powlison gently leads us to find God's goodness, grace, and comforting presence in our pain. We see how God is at work in our trials and can bring gold out of our afflictions. My copy is well marked as I know I will refer to this insightful book again and again!"

**Vaneetha Rendall Risner,** author, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering*

"Because David Powlison understands that 'profound good in our lives often emerges in a crucible of significant suffering,' he is fit to lead us in a workshop on suffering and God's grace. And that's exactly what *God's Grace in Your Suffering* is—a workshop where Powlison walks us through Scripture, the hymn 'How Firm a Foundation,' and our (and his) experiences, that we may see God's goodness and seek God's grace in and through our suffering."

**Juan R. Sanchez,** Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *1 Peter for You* and *Seven Dangers Facing Your Church*

"Here's a short book that is long on biblical wisdom for real life. I look forward to putting this book into the hands of those who struggle to connect the promises of the Bible with the painful realities of life in this world in a way that brings peace."

**Nancy Guthrie,** author, *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

"Yes and amen! David Powlison brings together suffering and the powerful, tender God who is with us in our sufferings and in whom they have meaning and purpose. You will find a big-picture view that breathes hope and encouragement, as well as profound nuggets that you will want to tape up over the kitchen sink to savor. As always, David makes things practical, personal, and 'ordinary.' If you live in this broken world, you will want to read this book!"

**Elizabeth W. D. Groves,** Lecturer in Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Grief Undone* and *Becoming a Widow*

# *GOD'S GRACE IN YOUR SUFFERING*

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*How Does Sanctification Work?*

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# *GOD'S GRACE IN YOUR SUFFERING*

DAVID POWLISON

CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*God's Grace in Your Suffering*

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover image and design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5618-0
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5621-0
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5619-7
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5620-3

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Powlison, David, 1949– author.
Title: God's grace in your suffering / David Powlison.
Description: Wheaton: Crossway, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017017293 (print) | LCCN 2017052509 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433556197 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433556203 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433556210 (epub) | ISBN 9781433556180 (tp)
Subjects: LCSH: How firm a foundation. | Hymns, English—History and criticism. | Consolation. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity.
Classification: LCC BV317.H69 (ebook) | LCC BV317.H69 P69 2018 (print) | DDC 248.8/6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017017293

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the men and women
with whom I am privileged to work at the
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation.
Your faith, love, wisdom, and gifts mean so much to
me personally. You give riches to the body of Christ.
You give your very selves. Thank you.

We most humbly beseech thee, of thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succor all those who, in this transitory life, are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity.

Book of Common Prayer

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3–4

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# INTRODUCTION

Job, his wife, and his three friends agreed on two things. Our lives are "few of days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1), and God's hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. But strife and perplexity set in among them when they tried to explain exactly how God and troubles connect.

They argued about the cause of Job's troubles; no one understood the backstory of cosmic drama. They argued about what God was up to; no one understood that God had purposes for good beyond human comprehension and he was not punishing Job. They argued about the validity of Job's professed faith and faithfulness; no one understood that Job was both the genuine article and a work in progress. And they argued about *who* needed to do *what* in response to affliction; no one understood that the Lord would show up, that he would be asking the questions, that his purposes would be fulfilled. The Lord himself described Job as "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). But who could have predicted the tumultuous journey that proved that fact?

Thousands of years later, we humankind are still short-lived

and still much afflicted. And our troubles still perplex us. Why is this happening to me? Where is God? What is he doing? What does faith look like? How does the Lord show up? Why is the journey so tumultuous?

And what difference does it make that in between Job's afflictions back then and your afflictions right now, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us? Job said:

> I know that my Redeemer lives,
> and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
> And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
> yet in my flesh I shall see God,
> whom I shall see for myself,
> and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
> My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25–27)

Job's Redeemer came to him at last. The Lord answered out of the whirlwind, and Job said, "Now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). But we see even more clearly. From where we stand, we see Jesus Christ. We see more of who the Redeemer is. We see more of how he did it. We say more than Job could say: "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). We see. But our lives are still "few of days and full of trouble."

Here is the central concern of the book before you. When you face trouble, loss, disability, and pain, *how* does the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ meet you and comfort you? How does grace and goodness find you, touch you, work with you, and walk with you through deep waters? You probably

already know something of the "right answer." Consider three sweeping truths.

First, it is obvious from both Scripture and experience that God *never* establishes a no-fly zone keeping all problems away. He never promises that your life will be safe, easy, peaceful, healthy, and prosperous. On the contrary, you and I are certain to experience danger, hardship, turmoil, ill health, and loss. And some of God's beloved children live lives particularly fraught with physical pain, poverty, isolation, betrayal, and loss. For all of us, death is the inevitable and impending final affliction. We humankind are mariposa lilies in Death Valley after rain. We flourish for a moment. Then the wind passes over us, and we are gone, and no trace remains. That's the description of God's blessed and beloved children according to Psalm 103:15–16. And, of course, people who are estranged from God also live brief and troubled lives. We cannot read God's favor or disfavor by assessing how troubled a person's life is.

Second, it is obvious from Scripture and experience that we also sample joys and good gifts from God's hand. The mariposa lily is beautiful in its season. Most people taste something of what is good—familial care perhaps, and daily bread, occasional feasting, a measure of good health, friends and companions, moments of beauty, opportunity to become good at something, committed love, children's laughter, a job well done, the innocent pleasure of resting after working, and perhaps a restful sleep. There are no guarantees of any particular earthly good, but all good gifts may be gratefully enjoyed.

Some people seem unusually blessed with temporal joys. Job enjoyed unusually good gifts at both the beginning and the end

of his life—Satan had accused the Lord of giving Job a cushy life as a bribe for faith. And arrogant people, at odds with God and self-reliant, may also enjoy an easy life of good health, growing wealth, and the admiration of others. That's how Psalm 73:3–12 describes people who flourish though they deem the Lord irrelevant. We cannot read God's favor or disfavor by assessing how easy and trouble-free a person's life is.

Third, it's obvious from Scripture—and it can become deeply rooted in experience—that God speaks and acts through affliction. As C. S. Lewis says, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[1] The purpose of this book is to anchor your experience more deeply in God's goodness. Suffering reveals the genuineness of faith in Christ. And suffering produces genuine faith. For example, when you struggle under affliction, the Psalms become real. True faith deepens, brightens, and grows wise. You grow up in knowing God. When you are the genuine article, you are also and always a work in progress.

Suffering is both the acid test and the catalyst. It reveals and forms faith. It also exposes and destroys counterfeit faith. Afflictions expose illusory hopes invested in imaginary gods. Such disillusionment is a good thing, a severe mercy. The destruction of what is false invites repentance and faith in God as he truly is. Suffering brings a foretaste of the loss of every good thing for those who profess no faith in the one Savior of the world, God's inexpressible gift, the Lifegiver. Affliction presses on unbelief. It presses unbelief toward bitterness, or despair, or addiction, or ever more desperate illusions, or ever more deadly

self-satisfaction—or to a reconsideration of what lasts. To lose what you are living for, when those treasures are vanities, invites comprehensive repentance. We can read God's favor or disfavor by noticing how a person responds to affliction.

God's hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. Each day will bring you "its own trouble" (Matt. 6:34). Some difficulties are light and momentary—in your face today and forgotten tomorrow. Other hardships last for a season. Some troubles recur and abate cyclically. Other afflictions become chronic. Some woes steadily worsen, progressively bringing pain and disability into your life. And other sufferings arrive with inescapable finality—the death of a dream, the death of a loved one, your own dying and death. But whatever you must face changes in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise that you, too, will live. Faith can grow up. You can learn to say with all your heart, in company with a great cloud of witnesses: "We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:16–17). We can learn to say it and mean it, because it is true.

If you are someone who has taken the book of Psalms to heart, if you've pondered the second half of Romans 8, if you've worked your way through Job, if you've let 1 Peter sink in, then you've already got the gist of how God's grace works in hardships. But there are always new challenges. The wisdom to suffer well is like manna—you must receive nourishment every day. You can't store it up, though you do become more familiar with how to go out and find what you need for today.

How will God actually engage *your* sufferings with his grace? You may know the right answer in theory. You may have known it firsthand in some difficult situations. And yet you'll find that you don't know God well enough or in the exact ways you need to for the next thing that comes your way.

We take God's hard answer and make it sound like a pat answer. He sets about a long slow answer*ing*, but we're after a quick fix. His answer insists on being lived out over time and into the particulars. We act as if just saying the right words makes it so. God's answer involves changing you into a different kind of person. But we act as if some truth, principle, strategy, or perspective might simply be incorporated into who we already are. God personalizes his answer on hearts with an uncanny flexibility. But we turn it into a formula: "If you just believe x. If you just do y. If you just remember z." No important truth ever contains the word "just" in the punch line.

We can make the right answer sound old hat, but I guarantee this: God will surprise you. He will make you stop. You will struggle. He will bring you up short. You will hurt. He will take his time. You will grow in faith and in love. He will deeply delight you. You will find the process harder than you ever imagined—and better. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. At the end of the long road you will come home at last. No matter how many times you've heard it, no matter how long you've known it, no matter how well you can say it, God's answer will come to mean something better than you could ever imagine.

He answers with himself.[2]

# 1

# YOUR SIGNIFICANT SUFFERING

Think of this book as a workshop. Put yourself into the story and you will get more out of it. Scripture is custom-designed to engage any and all difficulties we face in life. So put your troubles on the table. Listen to how our Lord invites us to get personal.

In essence, Jesus says, "In me you have peace. In the world you have trouble. But take heart—I've overcome the world" (John 16:33). We live in specifics, not generalities. You are invited to come candidly with your particular afflictions.

James says that you will "meet trials of *various* kinds" (James 1:2). These are the exact places where the Lord will develop steadiness and depth in your faith. In affliction you discover how you lack wisdom. So you ask for wisdom. And God freely gives what you need.

Peter says that you are "grieved by *various* trials" (1 Pet. 1:6). But in Christ you have been given something imperishable. God promises to guard you by his power and to make your faith more genuine and true as you pass through fire.

Paul says that our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ comfort us in "*all* our afflictions" (2 Cor. 1:4). Your troubles nestle within that promise. God will comfort and strengthen you, giving you a growing ability to help others in whatever troubles they face.

David prays for himself,

> Turn to me and be gracious to me,
> for I am lonely and afflicted.
> The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
> bring me out of my distresses. (Ps. 25:16–17)

And then he prays for all God's children,

> Redeem Israel, O God,
> out of all his troubles. (25:22)

You are invited to bring your need, your troubles, your afflictions, your loneliness into the heart of God's grace and deliverance.

All these voices speak out of experiences like yours—different in the specifics, but hard in the same ways. So bring your own story into what we discuss together.

> What is the most significant suffering you experienced in the past?
>
> _____

What is the hardest thing you are facing now?

_____

What are you afraid you might have to go through someday?

_____

Think about it and get specific. Write in the margins of these pages. Keep thinking when you put the book down. Pray about it. Talk it out with your best friend tomorrow. Walk it out. The title of this book is intentional. We are not going to discuss the general topic of God and suffering. We will consider how God's grace enters directly into *your* suffering.

Don't rush on. Pull out a pen or pencil. Take five or ten minutes—or more, if that's the honest thing to do.

Where are you struggling to make sense of things?

_____

Where do you need help?

_____

Where do you need wisdom?

_____

Where do you need courage?

_____

Where do you need mercy?

_____

Where do you need protection?

_____

Where do you need strength?

_____

The gifts of God's grace fit hand-in-glove with your need. *You* are responsible for half of this book! If you do your part well, it will be the better half.

Let me prime the pump a bit more to get you thinking broadly. Perhaps one catastrophic event leapt to mind. But as you think further, maybe something else presses forward into consciousness. Perhaps the searing moment has not been as significant as some difficult, disappointing relationship that has lasted a long, long time. There are many kinds of significant suffering. Sometimes something seemingly small is the perfect laboratory for growing in grace. Your Redeemer invites you to consider any life-troubling situation, whether large or small, and then to make it personal. None of us suffers in general. Each of us struggles in particular ways. You can put your particulars on the table.

Here is still another way to come at this. What has marked you? More specifically, what marked you for good? Profound good in our lives often emerges in a crucible of significant suffering. Jesus himself "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). Faith and love shine most clearly, simply, and courageously in a dark place.

And, what has marked you for bad? Our typical sins emerge in reaction to betrayal, loss, or pain. Hammered by some evil, we discover evils operating in our own hearts. We feel resentful, anxious, desperate, overwhelmed, confused—or all of the above!

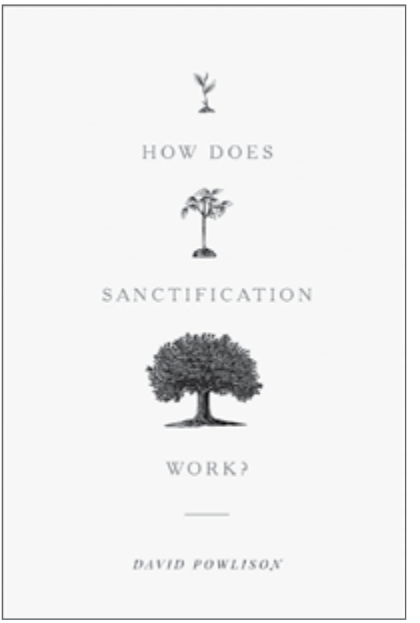
Perhaps most often, both the bad and the good come out of us. A trial brings out what is most wrong, and God brings about

what is most right as he meets you and works with you. So the psalm writer says,

> Before I was afflicted I went astray,
> but now I keep your word. (Ps. 119:67)

Affliction itself is not good, but God works what is very good, bringing the ignorant and wayward back home. Faith's enduring and alert dependency on the Lord is one of the Spirit's finest fruits. And you bear that fruit only when you have lived through something hard.

# How Does Sanctification Work?




Weaving together personal stories, biblical exposition, and theological reflection, David Powlison shows that the process of sanctification is personal and organic—not a one-size-fits-all formula.

"David's is a voice of sound, biblical wisdom in the midst of much confusion. If you are looking for a book on sanctification that is profoundly personal, biblically balanced, and deeply relevant, then this is it."

**Heath Lambert,** Associate Pastor, First Baptist Church of Jacksonville; Executive Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

For more information, visit crossway.org.

# *Where Is God?*

There are never quick fixes or easy answers when it comes to suffering. But even when we can't immediately see God's hand—when the struggle is hard and painful—he is working. Weaving together Scripture, personal stories, and the words of the classic hymn "How Firm a Foundation," David Powlison brings an experienced counselor's touch to exploring how God enters into our sufferings, helping us see God working in our own particular struggles—and discover how God's grace goes deeper than we could ever imagine.

"David's wisdom has helped me through a significant portion of my years as a quadriplegic, and I highly commend his new book. What a great guide for those who, every day, journey the hard, bloodstained path to Calvary."

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***DAVID POWLISON*** (MDiv, Westminster Theological Seminary) is a teacher, a counselor, and the executive director of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation. He is also the senior editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* and the author of *Making All Things New*, *Good & Angry*, and *How Does Sanctification Work?*

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