

BECOMING  
*Resilient*



HOW TO MOVE THROUGH SUFFERING  
AND COME BACK STRONGER

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This book is dedicated  
to all who are struggling.  
Who are hurting.  
Who are suffering.  
I pray you will find hope  
and healing in these pages.



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## FOREWORD

Understanding and processing pain has been the topic of numerous books and sermons. Many authors and pastors focus on trying to understand why evil and tragedy exist if God is a loving God. Often, such theological questions leave the human heart feeling empty and confused, perhaps because God Himself said, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways . . . as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).

I am convinced that we will never fully understand many of the painful and tragic experiences that come our way. That is why I was so encouraged when I read *Becoming Resilient*. This is not a book of platitudes. The focus is not on asking why tragedy happens but on how to have a healthy response to it. If tragedy consumes us, then two tragedies result. But if we embrace tragedy, then it becomes an event in our lives but does not destroy us. In fact, the tragedy propels us forward in choosing and living more purposeful lives.

Donna does not seek to cloak the reality of deep pain, but she does offer practical help on how to process pain in a healthy manner.

## Foreword

Through her journey as a counselor, she shares real-life illustrations of men and women who, through great tragedy, have deeply impacted the world for good. Living with an eternal perspective turns tragedy into ministry.

If you are walking through the valley of pain, this book will be a welcome companion.

Gary D. Chapman, PhD, author  
of *The Five Love Languages*

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And to you, the reader, thank you for joining me in this journey. I look forward to hearing about your victories. You are the reason for the book you are holding, and I am privileged that God has brought us together for this appointed time!

## INTRODUCTION

Why?”

This is the shortest but most powerful question my clients ask. And I hear it nearly every day from those who are deep in suffering. This question is the earnest cry for some rationale behind the pain that nearly immobilizes. As a professional Christian counselor, I see people every day who are suffering. Really suffering. They are living the unbearable, the fullness of injustice, the worst of traumas, the heights of disappointments. They have experienced a depth of loss that cannot be calculated; and by the time they get to me, oftentimes they are drowning. Their world has stopped. They feel they are living outside themselves, looking at the unthinkable. On the good days, they go through the motions. On the bad days, they cannot function at all. If you are suffering, you know exactly what I am talking about.

I hear “Why?” from the mother whose husband was killed in a car accident as she struggles to understand how she will survive without him. I hear it from those who have been diagnosed with a challenging and chronic disease and wonder how their lives will change. I hear it from those who were physically or sexually

abused as children and continue to live with the torment of the trauma into adulthood. I hear it from those who are persecuted and question why God would allow them to suffer unfairly at the hands of an enemy. I hear it from the father whose son was born with a birth defect that took his life. I hear it from someone who made decisions decades earlier that they now regret and can barely stand to verbalize. “Why?” may be the most common question we ask.

You may be the one posing the question right now. Perhaps you are facing the biggest mountain of your life. You have been given a hardship you don’t think you can survive. You want to bounce back, but sometimes just getting out of bed is a task. I have met you—or at least someone like you. One at a time, I have talked to thousands of sufferers. They each took their spot on the soft plaid loveseat in my office. They bravely unfolded their story and at one point or another posed the question “Why?”

Early in my years of counseling, I was intimidated by that question. I am not a theologian, and I cannot unpack every Greek or Hebrew phrase in God’s Word. I felt insecure trying to offer a theological response to a question a human being can never fully answer. You see, our real question is not “Why has God allowed this or that to occur in my life?” The underlying and most significant “Why?” of all is this: “Why would a loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow evil to exist?” Evil summarizes the trauma, the pain, the death . . . the crux of all our suffering and pain. And we as Christians sometimes wonder why God allows the situations in our lives that take us to our knees.

I’ve studied God’s Word as well as some great books that address suffering. I have come to the conclusion that God allows some suffering in our lives to expose the fullness of His character—His love and mercy, His compassion and concern, His forgiveness and redemption, His grace. In a perfect world, without suffering, we

would never have the opportunity to experience the fullness of God. While this understanding is important, it will never fully answer the “Why?” of our specific trials. And it certainly is not sufficient in helping us *cope* during our suffering.

After nearly twenty years of counseling and serving in Christian ministry, I’ve encountered many who have narrowly, and sometimes destructively, survived their pain. If you are suffering today, all too aware of your weakness, you can learn to suffer well. You don’t have to be a slave to inevitable struggles. In fact, you can learn healthy coping skills that will propel you to bounce back and even help you thrive. In the pages ahead, I am not going to try to simply explain why your suffering exists. Asking “Why?” creates an empty cycle of frustration that you have probably explored—unsuccessfully. “Why?” is the wrong question altogether and has possibly even lured you deeper into this pit you are screaming to exit. Instead of remaining stuck, we’re going to learn to bounce back. Let’s learn to live well when suffering is an inescapable part of life.

This book is a culmination of great truths I have learned from thousands of everyday people who have borne unthinkable pain and have trusted me amid their journey. They have taught me immeasurable amounts about how destructive we as humans can become when our pain paralyzes us. They have shown me how incredibly healthy and inspiring one who suffers well can be. Through disguised and composite stories in the chapters to follow, I’ll introduce you to many of these people. You’ll have the chance to learn from those who have been stuck and who have unintentionally developed disastrous methods of coping. You’ll also meet some heroes who have built resilience and suffered well in the face of terrible circumstances.

You are about to encounter something different. No more wasting time exploring *why* you are suffering. You’re going to discover how to survive—and how to survive well. You’re going to learn to

focus on the practical aspects of suffering, which will hopefully keep you off a plaid loveseat in an office that looks a lot like mine. “Why?” is not the only destructive question you’ll learn about. A host of useless thoughts, questions, and coping skills are keeping you stuck. And, unfortunately, life can become much more challenging if those poor thought processes and coping skills aren’t brought under control. So you’re going to learn to bounce back by changing the way you think and adopting healthy skills that will transform the way you suffer.

Each chapter has a distinct purpose and flows somewhat like the counseling process. I assign homework for my clients; therefore, I will be assigning homework to you as well. At the end of each chapter, you will find a series of application questions. Take the time to consider them. This is where the rubber meets the road. Journal your thoughts. Talk with a trusted friend. These questions can foster real progress, and I don’t want you to miss the victory that is ahead. If you are reading this book in a small group, use these questions to facilitate your time together. Each chapter ends with a victory verse. Grab hold of the truth in those words. Treasure them and repeat them often.

Each of us is sure to suffer at some point in our lives. Avoiding pain is not an option. Coping poorly in pain *is* an option, but one you will regret. I’ve seen sufferers transformed. I’ve seen those once debilitated by trauma become unstuck. Some of the healthiest people I know once sat in front of me on my plaid couch. They suffered the unthinkable and learned to suffer well. You can learn what they learned. Your story is not over. Let’s work together in your journey to ensure that your story ends without regrets, without destruction, and without additional, unnecessary suffering. Let’s learn how to build resilience when life’s hurts try to keep you stuck.

Thanks for joining me. I’ve often said that I’ve been the most honored and blessed by those who have trusted me in their pain.

I look forward to hearing about the victories yet to unfold in your upcoming journey!

*God, thank You for being ahead of us and with us. Help us discern the future journey. Give us the strength to endure. Allow this path to be productive, encouraging, and hopeful. Help us learn to suffer well. Amen.*



## PART 1



# *I'm Suffering . . . and I'm Stuck*

If you've made it through the introduction and you're still with me, it's probably because you are struggling and genuinely desire some relief. Thanks for sticking with me and allowing me to guide you through this journey. I trust that God will bless your courage as you move forward.

To get us started, we are going to need to have some challenging, frank discussions. Part 1 is designed to aid us in those conversations. In chapter 1, we'll set a baseline for expectations of suffering. We're going to normalize the experience of suffering and identify

different types and causes of suffering. Next, we'll bring to light specific destructive behavior patterns and poor coping skills that are keeping you stuck and potentially even causing you to experience additional, unnecessary suffering. We'll discuss what could happen if you remain stuck, as we explore the very serious vulnerabilities you may be experiencing. Woven through the first three chapters are compiled stories of individuals, just like you and me, who have stumbled in their struggles and have sometimes unintentionally made bad situations even worse. We'll look at why they stumbled and learn much-needed lessons from their journeys.

While the discussions in these first few chapters sometimes may be difficult for you, I encourage you to continue reading. Remember, God is faithful, and He will use our time in this first section to set the stage for your freedom. For your resilience.

I'm proud of you.

Now let's get serious about becoming resilient!



## What Is Normal about Suffering?

**S***uffering. Pain. Distress.* These are awful words. These are words we don't want to discuss. These are results of situations we'd like to escape. Yet each of us will face some form of suffering, for it is perhaps the most persistent of all human experiences. Suffering may be physical or emotional. It will be painful. Considering our culture, it makes all too much sense that suffering confuses us. Our economy is built on the desire for comfort, luxury, avoiding pain, and escaping difficulty. Money has minimized the experience and appearance of some of the suffering in America. Yet suffering continues. Though the wealthy are often buffered from some of the economic and social suffering faced by the poor, they are not immune to pain. Despite our best attempts and our most ingenious research, we all have seasons of physical, emotional, and/or spiritual suffering. Everyone experiences loss of some degree. Because we work so hard to insulate ourselves from problems, we struggle all the more when grief arrives at our door. And we rarely know how to respond when pain hits the lives of our neighbors, friends, or families.

## What the Scriptures Say

Some popular preachers say that if you have enough faith, you will be protected from difficulty, and you will live a wealthy and prosperous life. This theology is simply not true. Here's what Scripture says about suffering.

Paul clearly writes in Romans 8:17 that suffering is a part of the Christian life: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." For the early believers, and Paul himself, this sharing of suffering involved persecutions of all kinds—social, economic, and certainly physical.

James spoke of this challenge as well: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:2–3). James encouraged believers to expect trouble in life. The Christian life does not promise prosperity; it actually promises struggle.

Solomon normalized seasons of pain, as recorded in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8:

There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,  
a time to search and a time to give up,  
a time to keep and a time to throw away,  
a time to tear and a time to mend,

a time to be silent and a time to speak,  
a time to love and a time to hate,  
a time for war and a time for peace.

If we take these words at face value, we might think that roughly 50 percent of our “times” will be really difficult. Perhaps your seasons are not at a 50:50 ratio, but certainly you have experienced some challenging times. Solomon, in his wisdom, normalized the experience of pain that we, in this modern-day culture, work daily to deny.

We are introduced to the concept of pain and suffering early in the Scriptures. Oh, if only we lived in a pre-Genesis 3 world! Yet the events that transpired between chapters 1 and 3 set the world in motion toward disobedience and forever changed our experience of sorrow. When Adam and Eve failed to heed God’s warning regarding the fruits of a particular tree in their perfect garden, God had to address their sin. Below is God’s response to Adam and Eve, a response that you and I have inherited. It is this response that has determined the presence of anguish in your life and in mine:

To the woman he said,  
“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;  
with painful labor you will give birth to children.  
Your desire will be for your husband,  
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and  
ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you,  
‘You must not eat from it,’

Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground,  
since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are  
and to dust you will return.” (Gen. 3:16–19)

God’s response encompasses so much of the struggle you and I face so many years later. God was faithful in his assurance that childbirth would bring “very severe” pain. I can attest to that one myself! He shared the expectation that we would experience challenges in relationships that might create resentment and conflict. He warned that without work, we would go hungry, and that the work we would do would create anguish and difficulty. He instructed regarding the mortality of these bodies in which we abide. God did not sugarcoat or minimize the sentence placed on Adam and Eve. He was quite clear in His description of the distress that would characterize the experience of the human race.

### **Sources of Suffering**

Some of the suffering we experience is inflicted by ourselves. Some is inflicted by others. Some suffering can be avoided, and some clearly cannot.

#### ***Our Sin***

Some of our anguish, quite frankly, is the result of our choices. Sodom and Gomorrah is an obvious biblical example. The people of these cities disrespected God until their actions led to their demise. David, a man who loved God and whom God honored, suffered tremendously, oftentimes deep in despair, as a result of his sins. Jonah suffered a memorable detour in the belly of a large fish due to his disobedience of God’s instruction. Suffering that

results from our sin is often the most difficult to endure because it involves personal regret over once controllable and avoidable circumstances. Maybe you can identify because you are currently in misery due to the natural consequences of some of your choices. Perhaps you had an affair and now live alone because your marriage couldn't be reconciled. You fully realize that the grass really wasn't greener on the other side and earnestly desire to have your family back intact. You grieve because you realize that this reunion will never happen. Your spouse can't get beyond your sin, and you fear that your relationship with your children may forever be scarred. This type of loss is often more complex than a death, and you may sometimes find it difficult to get up in the morning or make it through your day.

Perhaps your story is a little different. Though few people know your real history, you are reminded daily that years ago you had an abortion. Your struggle is silent—one that few others are allowed to see. Your grief is deep and nothing eases your torment. Accepting forgiveness seems out of reach and perhaps even inappropriate in your mind. You suffer through your thoughts and memories.

Maybe you went to a seemingly innocent gathering one day and were unexpectedly introduced to heroin. Without thinking through the consequences, you decided to give it a try. This drug gave you an unanticipated escape from life's stressors. Before long, you became dependent on the drug, inviting some challenging people into your personal life and legal consequences that will follow you forever. You never set out to be an addict, but now you are a slave to a substance. You don't know how to cope with the physical symptoms you experience with withdrawal or how to get away from the horrible circumstances you have created. As it often is with suffering that we create ourselves, we are unaware of the subtle choices that generate our situations. As I often share with clients, sometimes "it becomes too late not to hurt."

Because of our sin or our destructive methods of coping with challenges, the ways in which we invite suffering into our lives are countless. In the chapters to follow, we are going to explore this aspect of suffering in more detail and strategize to ensure that we do not, from this point forward, invite unnecessary suffering into our lives.

### *The Sin of Others*

We do not bring on all suffering ourselves (despite what some false theologians may say). Much suffering comes at the hands of others, through their selfishness, negligence, or, even more severely, their evil and criminal behavior. The most obvious biblical example of this form of suffering is Jesus—a perfectly innocent man who took on the sins of the world and suffered a horrific death at the hands of those who misplaced their anger.

Adolf Hitler was at the center of World War II and the Holocaust in Europe. Under Hitler's leadership, millions of Jewish men, women, and children as well as civilians and soldiers lost their lives. Drove of innocent people experienced severe abuse, humiliation, starvation, molestation, and annihilation. Their suffering was the result of the sin of other people.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, launched widespread fear and suffering in America. We as a nation felt the pains of vulnerability as well as the pains of loss on that terrible day—and continue to feel the effects to this day.

However, most suffering caused by others is not as publicly known as Hitler's regime or 9/11. I can't count the number of hours I've spent with victims of terrible childhood sexual abuse at the hands of someone they should have been able to trust. Their suffering may not be immediately apparent, but their pain is often so intense it is nearly tangible. If this is your story, your suffering is an emotional pain that can sometimes be relentless.

A drunk driver who crosses the yellow line and hits a car head-on brings suffering to an innocent party. The drunk driver may cause physical pain, or even death, in addition to residual emotional and psychological turmoil.

Physical and verbal abuse create affliction in the lives of those who are the targets of such abuse. Throughout my years as a counselor, I have worked with clients to develop a safety plan for them to escape their homes in case of a violent situation. No one should have to plan to flee their own home because of abuse! If these words trigger a tender spot in your soul, you too may have traumatic memories and carry a degree of hypervigilance and distrust that others can't possibly understand. You may even have self-hatred brought on by an abuser's destructive words.

Though these are just a few examples, you can probably already imagine how suffering caused by others can be difficult to process and often makes us vulnerable to destructive methods of coping. We're certainly going to spend some time in the coming chapters discerning how to process this pain productively and take steps toward healing.

### ***Hurting at the Hands of God or Satan***

We're especially reminded of our human fragility when we experience pain that is not caused by ourselves or anyone else around us. It is in our nature to place blame, and sometimes we find that the only two places to look are God and Satan. Sometimes we face a devastating diagnosis or a natural disaster and are humbled by our weakness as we suffer with the consequences of something that cannot be effectively controlled by any human being. When I consider a biblical example, I think of Hannah, whose sorrow and despair over her barrenness affected her so much that a priest thought she was drunk. Hannah was feeling an emptiness that seemed to be undeserved. And let's not forget Job, a righteous

man who lost everyone he loved, every possession he owned, and even his physical health. He didn't bring this pain on himself, nor did any other human being. Job endured suffering as a result of a spiritual attack he could neither see nor understand. And remember the blind man described in John 9? In regard to his suffering, Jesus explained that "neither this man nor his parents sinned . . . but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v. 3).

It's difficult to make sense of suffering that can't be blamed on someone or something else. This makes coping more challenging and sometimes causes us to become stuck in our anguish. We're going to discuss in the coming chapters how to cope when we truly have no control over preventing or managing the consequences of uninvited disappointment or disaster.

So, you see, suffering is a normal part of the human experience. Our world has seen evidence of pain since shortly after the beginning of creation. Brokenness is normal. Affliction is part of the human condition. If that were the end of the story, it would have a depressing and discouraging conclusion. Thanks be to God, it is not the end of the eternal story, and it is not the end of your story! The next chapter is vitally important because we are going to consider unhealthy responses to pain and how we find ourselves stuck in suffering. But first, make sure you spend some time reading the application questions below. Think and pray about your answers or possibly even discuss them with others. This will lay a strong foundation for the work to follow.

*Victory Verse*

There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under the heavens.  
Ecclesiastes 3:1

*Application Questions*

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1. What are your reactions to the word *suffer*?
2. How have you been protected from pain as a result of living in America?
3. What did your family teach you about pain and suffering?
4. What have you grown to believe about suffering through the teachings of the church?
5. What are some of your personal experiences of suffering?
6. How have you experienced sorrow as a result of your sin?
7. How have you experienced sorrow as a result of the sin of someone else?
8. How have you experienced sorrow that has no reasonable cause?
9. Which source of suffering (self, others, God, or Satan) is the most challenging for you to accept?
10. What area of personal suffering do you most need to address in the chapters to follow? Where are you currently hurting and need some discernment or help?