

L I M P I N G
H E A V E N W A R D

*Living by Faith in Comprehensive
and Chronic Suffering*

K A R R I E H A H N


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Relevant Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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To those who feel unseen, unheard, afraid, and
alone in their suffering, this book is for you.

“Let him who walks in darkness and has no light
trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.”

ISAIAH 50:10

“And after you have suffered a little while,
the God of all grace, who has called you
to his eternal glory in Christ,
will himself restore, confirm,
strengthen, and establish you.

To him be the dominion forever and ever.

Amen.”

1 PETER 5:10–11

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INTRODUCTION

Why another book on suffering? It's a fair question to ask. Books on the topic abound, and many of them are helpful. But suffering is like the human face: Though we all have eyes, a nose, and a mouth, there's endless variety to how each part is arranged, making us unique and setting us apart from others. Suffering is similar, in that common features may be present in our stories, but there's also diversity in the shape of that suffering in each of our lives. Because we all experience different suffering and experience suffering differently—and because suffering in a fallen world is an undeniable, ever-present reality—it is good for us to have as many biblically faithful and practically helpful resources as possible.

A more personal answer to the question is that I've read many books on suffering, but most of them didn't address the specific questions or issues I was struggling with. That's not because they were bad books, but rather because every book is limited in what it can cover and who it can reach. I kept finding that three of the major aspects of my own suffering weren't being addressed in detail, leaving my biggest questions and challenges also unaddressed.

The first missing aspect relates to the *totality* of the suffering. That is, many books approach suffering from the perspective of the “one big thing” going wrong in life, while the rest of life remains relatively stable. For example, they might say, “Perhaps you’re dealing with financial difficulties. Or maybe you’re experiencing problems with your health. Or you might have lost relationships that were very precious to you.” When reading these books, I remember thinking, “But *everything* the author listed is happening to me. Where’s the book that addresses what to do when *all* the pillars holding up your life crash down around you rather than just one or two?”

The second missing aspect has to do with the *longevity* of such suffering. Many books approach suffering in the context of a season of one’s life that will come and go. While they may acknowledge that the suffering may be lifelong, they don’t aim to help people in such circumstances live out the implications of this hard truth or address the difficult questions that arise from ongoing suffering. To put it another way, how do we move forward in faith when crisis suffering settles into chronic suffering?

The third missing aspect relates to how these two types of suffering together—which I refer to as *comprehensive and chronic suffering*—can deeply disrupt a person’s relationship with God and relationships with others. Of course, all books on suffering are bound to discuss these relational aspects to some extent. But I hope to address questions and struggles in these areas that may be less emphasized or not covered in other books.

That said, this book aims to accomplish the following purposes: (1) to address the particular struggles that can arise from the kind of suffering that results in losses within *many different areas* of a person’s life—physical health, finances,

friendships, job and career, church, family, and home and belongings; (2) to address the particular struggles that arise from suffering that is *more than just a season* and will likely have to be endured throughout the rest of one's life; (3) to speak to those who find themselves grappling with deep, hard, and painful questions about who God is and his posture toward them in light of their comprehensive and chronic suffering; (4) to identify and address how those seeking to be "helpers" can actually cause more suffering and pain; and (5) to wrestle to connect comprehensive and chronic suffering to the God of the Bible in ways that restore faith, confidence, peace, endurance, and hope.

This book is especially targeted to those who

- feel stuck in or overwhelmed by their comprehensive and chronic suffering;
- struggle to believe that God is good and that his Word is true in light of their circumstances; and
- feel the absence of God and/or the absence of his people in their time of greatest need.

To all who resonate with these challenges, I hope that this book provides at least one transformative truth to sustain you in the faith. It is written for those enduring particularly deep, difficult, and long-term suffering, loss, and affliction. It is for those whose circumstances have almost crushed their souls and extinguished their faith. It is for those asking anguished questions in the heat of the battle rather than the comfort of the classroom. It is for those who wonder if God has forgotten to be gracious to them and who are lost in a fog of confusion despite their biblical and theological knowledge.

At the same time, this book can also be valuable for believers who aren't presently enduring comprehensive and chronic suffering. Though we don't all experience the same degree of suffering, we all experience it to some extent, and the questions and struggles that arise from suffering often share the same spiritual DNA. God's Word speaks to all sufferers, providing the framework through which we can understand and interpret the trials and heartaches we face in this life. Moreover, we are part of the body of Christ, and as such, Christian love compels us to care for fellow members in the wisest and most informed ways possible. Toward that end, I hope that this book serves as a guide for what the experience of comprehensive and chronic sufferers entails, as well as how we can better love such sufferers in the church.

Here's the path we'll take. Part 1 centers on how comprehensive and chronic suffering influences and is influenced by our relationships. The four relationships we'll explore are our relationships to ourselves (chapter 1), to other people (chapter 2), to Satan and his minions (chapter 3), and to God (chapter 4). Chapter 4 is particularly significant, as struggles here profoundly shape all the other struggles we face. In part 2, we'll look at some of the unique challenges and questions that arise from comprehensive suffering (chapter 5) and from chronic suffering (chapter 6), turning to Scripture to address some of our unanswered questions and to provide encouragement and hope. In part 3, which builds on all the truths we encountered in parts 1 and 2, we turn to what daily life looks like in comprehensive and chronic suffering, examining what a lifestyle of continual lamenting (chapter 7) and rejoicing (chapter 8) looks like.

Along the way, we'll address questions like these: Is God cruel? Does he play favorites among his children? Does he

hate me? Am I doing something wrong? Does he care? Is he really compassionate? Does he hear my prayers? Why do some believers experience more suffering than others? Why has God felt so absent from me, and even hostile toward me, in my deepest anguish? Why does God seem to be wasting my life? How can I endure when the suffering has impacted so many parts of what makes life feel “alive” and my circumstances are unlikely to change? Why are other believers leaving me to suffer alone or simply accusing me of sin?

No one book can say everything that needs to be said, and life is not as simple as reading a book and having everything instantly click into place. We are all on a journey of faith, walking with the Lord through difficult places, and no two journeys will look quite the same. But my prayer is that those who are beneath life’s crushing load might find encouragement to keep going in the race of faith in the pages that follow. And that is precisely why the book is titled *Limping Heavenward*.

In the race of faith, it doesn’t matter how quickly we can run. It just matters that we keep moving in the right direction, toward the Lord, and that we don’t give up. Limping isn’t less noble or less difficult than running; in fact, sometimes the opposite is true. Our limp is real, but so is the destination of heaven. Our groaning is real, but so is the glory that will one day be revealed to those who, by God’s grace, endure to the end.



Part 1

Relational Struggles in Suffering

1

ORIENTING OURSELVES

It all started on a weekend road trip to Austin, Texas, in June 2012. That weekend split my life in two: There was my life *before* that weekend, and what became my life *after* that weekend.

It came suddenly and out of nowhere. What started as a slight sore throat became the worst sore throat I'd ever experienced in my life. The next day, I grew weaker and weaker as all the energy drained from my body. I was alone at the house where I was staying and had to army crawl to the bathroom because I no longer had the energy to stand or walk. I was taken to an emergency room in Austin, where they said they couldn't find anything wrong with me. I was physically carried out of the ER because I couldn't walk, seriously ill but with no answers.

After a sleepless night, the next morning I was put in the passenger seat of the car in my pajamas, driven back to Dallas, and taken straight to an ER there, where my parents met me. I was admitted to the hospital while they ran a number of tests on me. At one point during the hospitalization, I began to lose the ability to communicate. In my head, I knew the words

that I wanted to say, but I couldn't get them to come out of my mouth. My body and brain seemed to be completely out of my control. Then the diagnosis came back: mononucleosis. I had heard of mono, of course. You get really tired for a few weeks and miss school or work, then you get better, right? But this felt like something altogether different.

After two restless days in the hospital, I signed out against medical advice. The constant interruptions and beeping machines throughout the night just made my exhaustion worse. The doctors said that I would get better in a few weeks or months. But I didn't. The earthquake that was set in motion that day came after almost everything in my life. Over the coming weeks and months, it felt like I was standing there frozen, watching almost everything I loved wobble precariously before crashing to the ground in a million tiny pieces, one after another.

Comprehensive Suffering

I use the term *comprehensive suffering* to describe what happens when so many different pillars of a person's world crash down simultaneously that life becomes overwhelming, terrifying, and unstable. It is too much, too fast, and often coincides with too little support from others. Any semblance of normalcy or safety is shattered. When we think about the different categories of life that can be touched by suffering, most fall into the following list: our physical health and bodies, our finances, our church life and ministry, our friendships, our careers, our families, and our homes and belongings.

When we consider examples of comprehensive suffering in Scripture, Job immediately comes to mind. Within a very

brief time span, his children were killed, his relationship with his wife became strained, his closest friends deeply wounded him, his wealth disappeared, his belongings were destroyed, and he was afflicted with illness. Worst of all, Job's relationship with God became a disorienting source of terror as he struggled to understand what was happening and why.

After that day in 2012, comprehensive suffering intruded into my life as well. First, my physical health came crashing to the ground. Then, five months into my illness, a dating relationship that had been heading toward marriage—the whole reason I'd been spending the summer in Texas even though I lived in California—ended with a surprise breakup instead, leaving me emotionally shattered. After trying to return to my job and life in California that fall, I relapsed (I had never actually healed in the first place), and my dad had to fly out to bring me back to Texas again to stay with him and my mom so that they could take care of me.

It was incredibly stressful to be sick as a single person and living somewhere else. I still had to deal with my condo, all my bills, and everything else from a different state with no one to help me. I had to try to get my California disability benefits long-distance, which was a monumentally stressful experience, only to receive a fraction of my normal salary. During that winter back in Texas, relationships with some of my work colleagues in California deteriorated, resulting in deeply painful relational breakdowns and accusations.

By the next spring, I had to step down from my full-time job due to my health limitations and relational concerns. This was a loss on multiple levels. I had to leave a ministry position that allowed me to use my gifts to serve others, I lost my sole source of income, and I lost a job that had provided me with

a community that had been a source of life, care, and blessing to me as a single woman. It was so much more than leaving a job. It was leaving my entire community, my happy place, my “home.”

Still emotionally reeling from all these losses and physically unwell, I pushed myself to find another job to pay my bills. I accepted a seemingly promising job opportunity that ended up being the worst job I’ve ever had. In the year that followed, I continued to become more and more physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained by the dysfunctional leadership and unhealthy culture that pervaded the organization. I spent many of my lunch breaks crying in a bathroom stall, asking the Lord to rescue me. I was desperate to leave, but I couldn’t quit without another job.

I suppose the Lord answered my prayer—but not in a way that made life any easier. That job abruptly ended after a year, when I was called into the office and informed that my position had been eliminated and that I no longer had a job, effective immediately. I was then informed that I would receive no unemployment benefits and sent home.

Now unemployed and with no source of income, I undertook the massive project of having to sell or give away most of my belongings, leave my home of ten years in California, and move halfway across the country to live in a tiny room in my parents’ house at the age of thirty-five. As I prepared to leave California, a friend let me use her house for a garage sale. I’ll never forget what it felt like to see most of my belongings spread out over a concrete slab, selling for pennies on the dollar, while everything that didn’t sell was loaded into trash bags to donate. All the evidence of the “normal” life I’d enjoyed was vanishing before my eyes, and my treasured

possessions became trash to dispose of. No area of my life was left untouched.

The metaphorical earthquake didn't take one thing, or two things, or three things. It was comprehensive. (And this was just the beginning. Much more was to come.) It felt like I was sitting amid the ruins of a shattered life with nothing but broken pieces, chaos, and confusion all around. The suffering wasn't neatly cordoned off to just one or two areas of my life. Rather, it was far-reaching in how many areas of my life it ravaged.

This earthquake occurred over a period of about two years. So, while it was comprehensive, it was not yet chronic. It was still an acute situation, a supposed "season" that I and everyone else expected would be resolved in the coming months after I moved back to Texas. But my health did not improve after the move; it actually got worse. I became partially home-bound as my body shut down on me.

In retrospect, the sheer breadth and depth of so many losses so close together was more than my body or soul could take, and I didn't have time and space to process the losses, nor anyone to process them with. Even though I was sick, I had to keep working to pay my bills and retain medical insurance since I didn't have a spouse to support me, producing a crushing amount of emotional stress over my finances and worsening my physical condition.

I also felt pressure to keep pushing spiritually. It seemed as though many of the people around me did not want to hear me cry or were not willing to lament my losses with me. To the contrary, the people around me said I needed to be more joyful in my suffering, more content with my life circumstances, more trusting in the Lord. It was clear that to some, I hadn't

proven I was “godly” enough in my suffering, and my spiritual maturity was now in question.

After I had lived that way for two years, my body completely shut down in exhaustion. Looking back, I see that I had been pushing myself on sheer adrenaline for far too long. But after returning to Texas to figure out my next steps in a radically disrupted life, my body seemed to sense that rest was possible and decided to shut down on me.

I had fully expected that after losing so much, the Lord would allow me to start over again in Texas, though starting from square one in my mid-thirties felt daunting. I had imagined that within a few months, I’d be physically healthy, get a new job, move into my own apartment, find a church community, rebuild a new network of friends, and maybe even get married while I was still young enough to have children. But none of that happened.

It’s interesting to note that when we look at Job’s story in Scripture, right on the heels of comprehensive loss, Job responded with worship. It was still an acute situation for him. The pain was raw, but it wasn’t yet ongoing. But as days and weeks turned into months, we see Job being worn down as his faith started to manifest itself differently than in the early days when he declared, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

Chronic Suffering

In the years that followed, my acute suffering morphed into chronic suffering, and I did not experience the renewal and restoration that I and others had hoped and prayed for. Instead, my life seemed to hit a dead end, and I felt completely

trapped within the four walls of my room in my parents' house. That's when the chronic aspect of the suffering entered my experience: I felt trapped in a hallway.

No matter how many jobs I applied for, no viable opportunities came. Because I had always had a heart for ministry, I had no experience in a secular career path that would provide adequate financial compensation. The options were pathetically few. On the rare occasions that I did get an offer, it was either too low-paying to make ends meet or impossible to do with my health limitations, so I continued to drain my savings. I tried to get involved at a new church, but relationships like the ones I'd had in California just didn't form. I didn't make many new friends, and I was painfully lonely. Having to live with my parents due to my financial situation meant living in a suburban area that was predominantly families with young children, and very few people seemed able to connect with a single woman with no children. I felt like an alien, a cultural oddity. And the entire time, I was going from doctor to doctor in search of a diagnosis for the crushing exhaustion and painful neurological symptoms that were destroying my life yet refusing to reveal their identity despite all the medical tests that were being run.

As the years went by, my hope of getting married and having children faded. After all, who would want to marry me—a chronically ill woman who wouldn't be able to have kids or live a normal life? And even if someone did want to marry me, what would I do if he started having health problems too, since I could barely take care of myself? As physical and financial problems continued to weigh me down like a crushing load, my hope of moving out of my parents' house into my own place ebbed away. As medical treatment after medical

treatment failed to cure my mysterious condition, my hope of functioning like a normal adult again died a slow death. And as meaningful friendships and relationships continued to elude me, my hope of ever feeling connected or part of a caring community again withered.

Not having meaningful work to do made my life feel purposeless. Both my physical condition and the lack of work left me isolated and alone in my room most days, reading or staring out my window at a crape myrtle tree, as spring, summer, fall, and winter cycled through over and over. The terror of my financial situation haunted me relentlessly, the stress worsening my physical condition. And another dating relationship that had held out the promise of being the ever-elusive “reason” why the Lord had allowed my life to come crashing down and brought me to Texas ended as miserably as the previous relationship had. The more I tried to make sense of it all and discern God’s purpose, the less sense everything seemed to make, and the less I could discern God’s purposes at all.

It felt like I was in a hallway lined with doors on both sides. I was desperately pounding on the doors and jiggling locked knobs, but God wasn’t opening any of them for me in my attempts to start over again. I continued running up and down the hallway, banging on every door I could find, grabbing every doorknob I could get a hold of. But nothing changed. Eventually, I slumped to the floor in an exhausted heap. What do you do when you try your best to start a new life after your old life is taken away, but you find yourself permanently locked in the hallway? Why was a sovereign and good God keeping me trapped and preventing me from starting over? I felt like the remaining belongings I’d brought back to Texas and put in a

small storage unit a few miles away. They lay there in boxes in the dark, collecting dust—unseen, unused, not fulfilling the purposes for which they were created.

We can display incredible resilience and fortitude in crisis. Our bodies and souls gear up for battle. In the beginning, when a situation is fresh and acute, we have strength to fight. Our adrenaline and cortisol are pumping. While acute suffering may be hard, its limited and relatively short duration doesn't tax our resources to their dregs. We have enough strength to endure a season, and the people around us are most comfortable and familiar with supporting us in brief, acute seasons of suffering, especially if others are advocating for us or making our needs known.

But when days turn into months and months turn into years with little change or improvement, and when we're doing it essentially alone, that's a different story altogether. Our human resources of strength, faith, and wisdom don't extend that far or that deep. After all, hallways are meant to take us from one place to another; they're not meant to be places where we live. Yet chronic suffering can feel like taking up residence in a hallway; we are stuck in a purgatory between the life we once had, which is now inaccessible, and a new life we want to start but that keeps eluding us, ever out of our grasp despite our best efforts.

We see this in Job's story as well. As suffering goes on with no resolution, his triumphant declaration of faith at the beginning of the book turns into the long middle section of the book, where we find bewildered and excruciating dialogues of a faith stretched almost to the breaking point. We can often endure a short-lived, major crisis. We can often endure chronic but low-grade suffering. But who can endure

a chronic crisis? And, as we see in the book of Job, this type of suffering can often be compounded by unhelpful or unloving responses from the people around us.

But the very worst part of this suffering is what can happen in our relationship with God. Job's greatest distress in all his suffering was how it led to great anguish and confusion about God's character and his posture toward Job. So perhaps the better question is this: Who can endure a chronic crisis apart from the knowledge that a loving and powerful God is not *against* us but *for* us in our affliction (see Ps. 56:9)? What do we do when our lives feel like a story that God just got tired of writing and abandoned midcourse?

External Circumstances Versus Internal Anguish

When we talk about the things that happen to us or to others, we're speaking about external circumstances. This is primarily a communication of the facts: It's the *whats* that have happened to us. For example, we lost a job, we got sick, our spouse or child died, our house burned down, we went through a divorce, or we experienced a rupture in a relationship. But these *whats* are just the tip of the iceberg that lies beneath: how these external circumstances impact our emotions, minds, faith, and relationship to God. This internal anguish is much harder to explain to other people, because no matter what words we use, they feel inadequate to convey the gravity of the situation and the desolation of our soul.

Comprehensive and chronic suffering can result in profound inner anguish as we struggle to orient ourselves both to what we're enduring and to how it's internally affecting

us. I felt profound terror and anxiety during the first weeks when the mono was acute. I had no control over my own body and experienced mysterious physical episodes of weakness, faintness, malaise, and not feeling “right” in my own body. It actually felt like I was in the process of dying. When the dating relationship ended, I was emotionally shattered. It happened unexpectedly during my acute illness, and that relationship had been one of my only sources of stability in the present or hope for the future. When that came crashing down, I was more than heartbroken. It almost destroyed me. I remember screaming (literally) to the Lord in prayer, telling him that if he didn’t help me, I wouldn’t survive. Without his strength, I had no hope of making it through.

As relationships with friends and colleagues also deteriorated, I was filled with grief, sadness, shame, and loneliness. It hurt to lose friendships I had treasured. It made me feel shame to be told that I wasn’t godly enough in my suffering. I was confronted by a close friend for not being “cheerful” enough while ill; another time, a friend asked whether I was pretending that my illness was worse than it really was. I remember lying on the hard floor of my kitchen one night, sobbing after attempts at reconciling relationships had fallen flat, so filled with grief and pain that I thought I might actually die of a broken heart. I felt guilty that I apparently hadn’t been brave enough or strong enough in my suffering despite my best attempts.

As time went on and things didn’t get better, discouragement led to depression, and depression gave way to despair. I kept journaling, trying to figure out what God was trying to “teach” me and racking my brain for how my sin might be causing my suffering. I lost any sense of God’s presence, love,

or care for me as, spiritually, everything seemed to go dark. Sometimes I felt excruciating emotional pain; other times I felt numbness, since not feeling at all was sometimes better than constantly feeling too much. Eventually, I forgot what it felt like to be happy.

I also felt like a misfit at church and with other Christians, awkwardly trying to participate in conversations that revolved around the “normal” things of life that everyone else had but that were foreign to me. I tried to smile and nod on the outside, but inside the alienation from other believers only worsened my suffering. It felt like I was alone in a rowboat on the ocean in a massive storm, overwhelmed by winds and waves, just trying to survive. But when I went to church or small group, everyone else sounded like they were sailing on a cruise. It did not appear that we were in the same boat at all. After so many attempts to build new friendships fell flat, I began to feel ashamed, wondering if I was no longer fun to be around or worthy of friendship or considered desirable by others. I wondered, perhaps, if others thought I was just not worthy of being known or loved.

The constant financial pressures produced chronic stress, as I felt helpless and alone, unsafe and insecure. Thinking about the future terrified me. Who would care for me when my parents died and I had no spouse, no children, no friends? Who would be there for me if I had an emergency or was hospitalized? How could I endure if the physical pain became worse? And how could I bear to be so alone every day for the rest of my life? I felt abandoned by others in my suffering, and worst of all, I felt abandoned by God. I remember sitting in the pink chair in the corner of my room one day, experiencing a moment that felt like my faith got sucked out of my soul and

there was nothing left. I simply didn't have the strength to go on any longer. Something inside me broke.

Theologian R.C. Sproul notes, "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."¹ Indeed, suffering can strain faith to the limits, especially when it's both comprehensive and chronic.

Prepared for Suffering?

Comprehensive and chronic suffering often brings us to a new frontier. It forces us out of a comfortable, predictable, settled land into a harsh, uninhabited wilderness. Paul Tripp observes, "Suffering takes us to the borders of our faith. It leads us to think about things we've never thought about before and maybe even question things we thought were settled in our hearts."² Because of this, we should not be shocked if comprehensive and chronic suffering impacts our view of the world or brings us to painful places in our relationship with God that we would never have expected.

We often hear the sentiment in modern evangelicalism that if we just arm ourselves with enough biblical truth before the tsunami of suffering hits, then we can triumphantly sail through any affliction with otherworldly joy, peace, strength, and confidence. But that sentiment is often inaccurate, and it sometimes borders on arrogance or presumption. Of course we should store up God's Word in our hearts and learn all that we can about his character and his ways. But ultimately, we can't entirely inoculate ourselves against the profound impact

of deep and lengthy affliction, for if Satan aims to destroy our faith (and he does), we would expect it to stretch us right up to the border of our breaking point.

Job was the most righteous man of his day (see Job 1:1), but his godly maturity did not prevent his going to very painful and dark places in comprehensive and chronic suffering. It won't prevent our going there either. But the good news is that God shepherds us into and leads us through the dark places, even when we can't see him or feel him there at all. Many of God's beloved children have found themselves in such places, so if we find ourselves there as well, we are not alone.

Suffering and Trauma

The word *trauma* is being used a lot these days, and it can get watered down, overused, and stripped of its true meaning when people use the term casually or offhandedly. However, the severity of the experience of comprehensive and chronic suffering may truly lead to traumatization. Counselor Darby Strickland defines trauma in this way:

Trauma refers to the emotional, spiritual, and physical disruptions that occur when a person is overwhelmed by extreme suffering. . . . An event may rise to the level of a traumatic experience when it is sudden and unpredictable, involves a threat to life, or is a profound violation of trust. The word *traumatized* also describes a person who is overwhelmed after a series of adverse experiences. . . . Traumatized people often experience a severe disruption in their relationships with God and others because of what has happened.³

It's easy to see how comprehensive and chronic suffering can lead to trauma, but some may wonder, What is the relationship between suffering and trauma? Perhaps the simplest way to conceptualize it is to imagine a large circle labeled *suffering*. Within that larger circle of suffering, imagine a smaller circle labeled *trauma*. In other words, not all suffering results in trauma, but all trauma involves suffering. It's also important to note that experiencing trauma does not indicate that a person lacks spiritual maturity. As creatures, we are finite and frail beings, both body and soul.

While the Bible does not use the specific word *trauma*, it does portray deep affliction and the various spiritual, physical, and relational problems that such affliction can produce. Because trauma (or, for those who prefer other terminology, "severe affliction") lies within the broader realm of suffering, God's Word provides hope and help to those who have been traumatized by comprehensive and chronic suffering. But because this smaller circle of trauma has contours and features that are often not present in the larger, more general circle of suffering, biblically wise and nuanced care is imperative for those whose experience has resulted in trauma.

Our Lord Jesus knew how to care for afflicted people. He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary" (50:4). Jesus knew how to wisely use his words in ways that brought sustenance and strength to the weary. He also fulfilled the prophecy that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench" (42:3). Jesus did not act or speak in ways that crushed the brokenhearted or extinguished the last flicker of hope from the downcast.

It took a long time for me to recognize that my suffering had resulted in trauma. For years, I met with multiple counselors I trusted and respected, but it didn't seem to help very much. I expected myself to just "get over it" and "move on" (and it seemed like that was what other people wanted me to do as well). I berated myself for not being "godlier," for not being "strong" or "faithful" enough in my adversity. But no matter how much I tried to get a handle on my suffering, I didn't make any progress. When the interpretive lens of trauma was introduced to me, so much began to make sense in terms of my internal emotional landscape and my physical bodily responses. I finally felt as though someone were describing my feelings and struggles exactly. I wasn't crazy, stupid, or rebellious. Rather, I had experienced too much, too fast, for too long, with too little support, and I had been pushed to the farthest borders, spiritually and physically, of what I could handle.

Have you found that truths and strategies that enabled you to walk through other types of suffering in the past haven't seemed to address your current experience of comprehensive and chronic suffering? Or have you received general counseling that has proven unhelpful (and perhaps even caused more harm)? If so, looking into biblical counseling resources on trauma, as well as working with a counselor who has experience in this area, could be profoundly helpful.

What About Sin?

Some people might ask what this book has to say about *sin* and its relationship to suffering and sufferers. It's certainly true that all God's people are simultaneously saints, sinners, and sufferers. Suffering never justifies or excuses sin, and sufferers

are not sinless people. But the intended focus of this book is to “zoom in” on the experience of suffering to grapple with some of the particular challenges to faith that can occur in deep affliction. While it’s true that sometimes we suffer because of our sin, and inevitably we’ll sin when we suffer, there are many fine books and other resources to help Christians fight against sin. The purpose of this book, however, is to focus our attention on how to “encourage the fainthearted” and “help the weak” rather than on how to “admonish the idle” (1 Thess. 5:14).

When it comes to suffering and sin, the book of Job teaches us to resist hasty assumptions based on limited information. This book is geared toward those whose suffering seems to fit best within the category of Job-like suffering—people who have spent much time and shed many tears asking the Lord and others what sin may be causing their suffering and can’t seem to find an answer, or who labor to discern particular areas of needed growth that their suffering may be intended to produce and come away with no clear answers. It is for these reasons that the sufferer’s sin is not a focus in this book.

More to the Story

As one might expect, there’s a lot more to my story than what I’ve shared here. My goal is not to provide an exhaustive, detailed narrative of everything that’s happened to me but rather to highlight for readers what it can look and feel like when comprehensive and chronic suffering intrudes into one’s life. I’m not writing this book as someone who now has it all “figured out” or who doesn’t wrestle with the topics we’ll cover. I struggle every day, especially as each year seems to bring a heavier load of health problems.

I've never gotten back to "normal" life but am seeking to adapt over time to the radically different life and circumstances I've been given, doing my best at the opportunities I do have and trying to let go of everything in life that remains out of my grasp. I don't feel like I "fit in" in the normal world of healthy, independent adults and the lives they lead. But I am trying to operate within the story the Lord is writing for me rather than expending my limited energy frantically trying to snatch the pen out of his hand so that I can become the author and write the life story I wish I had. And isn't there a sense in which all of us must do that?