

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



REVISED AND EXPANDED

R.C. SPROUL

“It’s a real gift to the church when a seasoned theologian, with insights gained from years of personal experience and biblical study, handles a tough topic like suffering. Here you will find the wisdom of biblical perspective combined with the eternal hope of the gospel leading you to greater rest in your Savior, even in times of trouble. I am thankful for the new edition of this book.”

—DR. PAUL DAVID TRIPP  
*President, Paul Tripp Ministries*  
*Philadelphia*

“As an oncologist, I have the privilege of caring for people as they ‘walk through the valley of the shadow of death.’ In such times, people of faith find themselves faced with the most troubling questions of human existence, namely those raised by suffering and death. In *Surprised by Suffering*, R. C. Sproul concisely and sensitively affirms what I believe to be the three critical truths we need to grasp in order to persevere through suffering and death. First, the inevitable and vocational nature of death/suffering; second, God’s sovereign redemptive purposes in suffering; and finally, the certainty of eternal life in perfect fellowship with Him and our fellow believers. I was delighted to learn of this book’s republication, and my reading of the manuscript reaffirmed why we do not grieve as those who have no hope.”

—DR. JAMES W. LYNCH JR.  
*Professor of medicine*  
*Division of Hematology/Oncology*  
*University of Florida College of Medicine, Gainesville, Fla.*

“In *Surprised by Suffering*, John Calvin meets Florence Nightingale. This is a rare work, a melding of the theologian and the pastor—a book that looks straightforwardly at suffering and teaches, explains, confronts, and comforts. Buy a dozen, as you will be giving this one away to someone who is hurting in the world around you.”

—REV. JOHN P. SARTELLE SR.  
*Senior minister*  
*Christ Presbyterian Church, Oakland, Tenn.*



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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





# CONTENTS

PREFACE .....xi

## PART ONE: *Unto Death*

Chapter One: SUFFERING, PERPLEXITY, AND DESPAIR ..... 1  
Chapter Two: WALKING THE VIA DOLOROSA ..... 13  
Chapter Three: A CASE STUDY IN SUFFERING ..... 25  
Chapter Four: PURPOSE IN SUFFERING ..... 37  
Chapter Five: THE FINAL CALLING ..... 47  
Chapter Six: DYING IN FAITH ..... 57

## PART TWO: *After Death*

Chapter Seven: SPECULATIONS ON LIFE AFTER DEATH ..... 71  
Chapter Eight: JESUS AND THE AFTERLIFE ..... 85  
Chapter Nine: TO DIE IS GAIN ..... 103  
Chapter Ten: A VISION OF THINGS TO COME ..... 115  
CONCLUSION ..... 133  
Appendix: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ..... 135  
INDEX OF SCRIPTURE ..... 147  
INDEX OF SUBJECTS AND NAMES ..... 151



## PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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



PART ONE

*Unto Death*



## CHAPTER ONE

# SUFFERING, PERPLEXITY, AND DESPAIR

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### "MY BURDEN IS LIGHT"

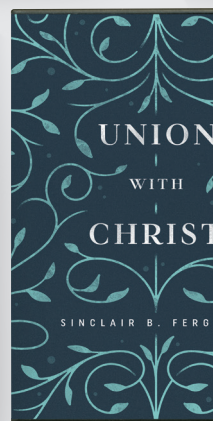
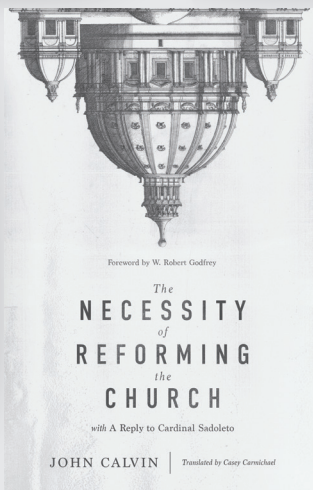
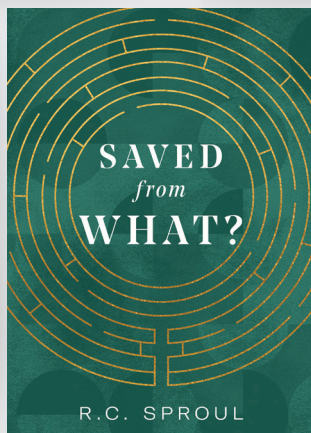
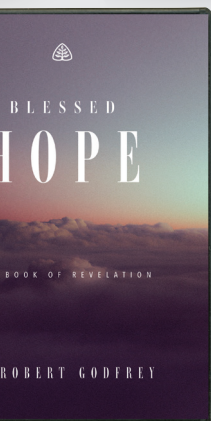
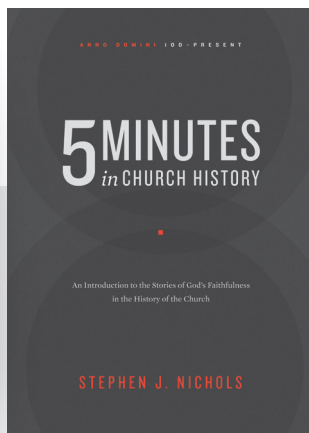
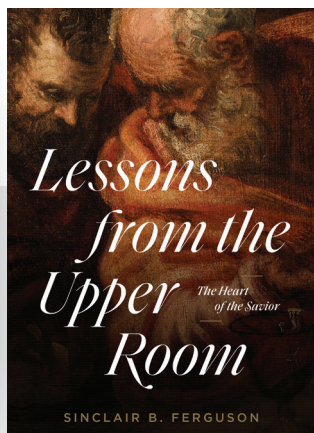
There have been times in my life when I have uttered foolish prayers. When I have been hard pressed, I have cried out to God: "This much and no more, Lord. I can't handle another setback. One more straw and I'm finished." It seems that every time I pray like that God puts a fresh load on my back. It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

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

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

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

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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