



# SUFFERING WELL



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THE PREDICTABLE SURPRISE  
OF CHRISTIAN SUFFERING



*Paul Grimmond*

GUIDEBOOKS FOR LIFE



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## **Guidebooks for Life**

Bible-based essentials  
for your Christian journey

*Suffering Well* is part of a series of straightforward, practical Christian books from Matthias Media that deal with the important nuts-and-bolts topics that Christians need to know about as we walk each day with our Master.

Some Christian books are all theory and no practical application; others are all stories and tips with no substance. The Guidebooks for Life aim to achieve a vital balance—that is, to dig into the Bible and discover what God is telling us there, as well as apply that truth to our daily Christian lives.

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I moved to Sydney in 1990 and became almost instantly involved with the ministry of St Matthias and Campus Bible Study at the University of New South Wales. In the years since then I have had the privilege of watching many brothers and sisters pack up their belongings—and for some of them, their families—and travel to the other side of the world to speak to complete strangers about our Lord Jesus Christ. It has not been easy for any of them, and for some the cost has been particularly acute. In many ways they have been the best example to me of what this book is all about.

They have counted the cost, lived for Jesus, and encouraged me by their example to suffer well.

This book is for them.



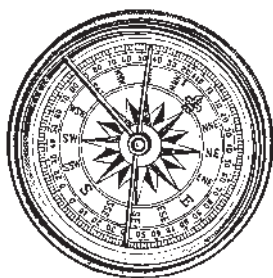
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## Chapter 1

# THE REAL PROBLEM



SIMON STEPS INTO THE swimming complex. The humidity is a relief after the dry chill of the early morning air. The soft lights welcome him in out of the blackness he wakes to almost every morning of his life. Even the faint burning of the chlorine fumes in the back of his throat is good. It contains the promise of silent relief. In a few moments he will be gliding through the water, lost in his own private world.

But these are small pleasures; tiny joys invisible to the untrained eye. Simon doesn't pretend otherwise. The sights and smells of the pool are a momentary diversion from the morning routine.

Breakfast in silence. Twenty minutes in the car—more silence. His father hasn't talked to him much since he came home and told his parents he'd decided to become a Christian. But at least home is bearable. The swim team is insufferable.

"Hey Simon, saw you talking to Kate yesterday. Don't



get too close. You know the rules. No sex before marriage!”

“Yeah, what would Jesus do?”

“He wouldn’t know what to do!” (Laughter.)

“Whatever you do, don’t look at her in her swim suit!”

The jokes change every morning in the way that only teenage boys exploring their limited creativity can manage, but the subject matter never varies. Thankfully the whistle interrupts and the derision is drowned by the demands of the morning’s training. Simon dives into liquid bliss—an hour alone with God to pray and to plead for strength to keep serving Christ. An hour to wonder why he ever decided to pursue this whole Christian thing at all...



SALLY WAKES WEARILY IN the morning darkness. At least, it is probably dark outside. But the hospital is never really dark. The muted lights never sleep; nor do the machines with their constant hum. In her better moments she pretends they are married. She imagines the lights declaring their undying love for the hum and the hum promising never to leave, in sickness or in health. But it is a strange marriage—they **never** leave each other’s side.

Unfortunately, Sally’s better moments have been playing hide-and-seek for weeks now. At first they weren’t very good at it. She could find them when she needed to—when visitors came and stood gravely by the bed, or



when Jane dropped in to keep her up to date with what was happening at school. But since Friday, something has changed. Her better moments are getting smarter, more elusive. It's getting harder to look on the bright side as the morphine battles to keep the pain at bay.

The pain. It had been quite innocuous at first. "Growing pains", her mum had said, before they knew better. And in a way, she was right. Something is growing and the pain and the growing are related. But it is another unnatural marriage. This one will give birth to death and not life.

It isn't fair. Everyone says so. She is only 17.

Sally gets sick of the clichés, but she also understands that sometimes hopelessly inadequate words are better than no words at all. She needs words—words to give expression to the anger and disappointment. She wants to meet God face to face and ask her questions. She wants to make him give her some answers.

Yet, for all of the anger and disappointment, in her frustration and grief her trust does not diminish. God's Spirit is powerful.

She knows that her Father, who once spoke life into existence out of nothing, can mould life out of something as inconsequential as death. She knows his commitment to her. She reminds herself each day of the one great truth: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. And she reads and re-reads the Bible her grandmother gave her, until the pages are worn. Not that she needs the pages any more. She knows her favourite verse by heart: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither



shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

In God’s timing, Sally will be born into her heavenly home before her 18th birthday in this world.

God is very faithful.



IT’S NOT SURPRISING THAT a book about suffering begins with stories of suffering—and with good reason. Suffering is not really a philosophical problem. Suffering is experienced, not just contemplated; it’s often an event in our guts before it’s a problem in our heads.

But I have told—in fact, made up—these particular stories for a reason. Let me ask you an uncomfortable question. If an angel appeared to you tonight in a dream and said that you had to choose between experiencing either Simon’s suffering or Sally’s suffering, which would you choose and why?

I know what my answer would be. I would choose Simon’s any day. It involves less physical pain, it seems shorter term and, most importantly of all, Simon will still be alive in a year from now. By just about any sensible measure, Sally’s suffering is more significant. It’s a no-brainer. If I had to choose, I would choose Simon’s suffering.

But stop with me for a moment and reflect on how I made my decision. Being alive rather than dead in a year’s time is a big deal for me. But what would God’s



word say (if I took the time to look)? When the apostle Paul says, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21), what sort of priorities does that reflect? If being dead in a year’s time means being face to face with my Lord in glory, is it really so bad after all?

And what about Paul’s other statement just one verse earlier?

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. (Phil 1:20)

If the most important thing in the world is to cling to Christ and to honour him, who is in the gravest danger? Sally’s faith, although tested, never waivers while Simon questions deeply. Who will still belong to Jesus in one year’s time?

So let me ask you again: which form of suffering would you choose, and why?



IT’S A POTENTIALLY FOOLISH question. Comparing our sufferings in order to decide whose suffering is worse is a ridiculous exercise. I’ve heard many immature Christians arguing about why their life is harder and more painful than everyone else’s. Usually the argument is dreadfully self-centred and vacuous, not to mention worse than watching paint dry for the onlookers. It’s a foolish



conversation that leads nowhere.

Yet sometimes comparisons are invaluable. When I used to talk to my wife's grandmother about what her childhood was like, hearing her stories helped me and my children to understand how much we are products of our own times. My kids could hardly believe that people used to walk miles to and from school every day as well as doing chores that my kids would consider slave labour. But it helped them to think about themselves and their own experiences. My grandmother (in-law) didn't live in a draconian society that robbed people of their choices and their youth. She just grew up in a relatively loving family who did their best to care for each other with what God had given them.

The point of the Simon and Sally stories is not to invent some scale of Christian suffering. We don't need to compare our own level of martyrdom with those around us, or start our own reality TV contest—*World's Most Persevering Christian*. The point is rather to raise some important questions about suffering. What sorts of values and ideals do we have about suffering? What is our theology of suffering? And does it match up with what the Bible really has to say about suffering?

That last question is really the central question of this book—a book that occurred more by accident than design. I didn't set out to write a book; I set out to produce a set of Bible studies about suffering. And as I began, I thought I knew pretty much what I was going to say. But the more I read the Bible, trying to find the right passages to make the points I thought I needed to make, the more





uneasy I felt. It became obvious to me that my ideas about suffering hadn't been sufficiently shaped by God's word.

John Wesley has been famously quoted as saying, "Our people die well". It's a sentiment worth repeating. How should we live as God's people in the face of suffering? What does it mean to suffer—and even die—well?

That's what this book is all about. It's not a theodicy (an explanation of how God is all good and all powerful and yet we still live in a world of suffering). And it's not a set of stories written by those who have suffered. Rather, it is a biblical exploration of what God wants us to know about him and about our world when it comes to suffering. It is an encouragement to do what the Bible calls on us to do: to be people who suffer well.

I am persuaded that the key to suffering well lies in understanding the fullness of God's revelation about suffering. Almost ironically, this means we won't find God's true comfort unless we wrestle with ideas that are initially confronting and even painful. And so a large part of what follows is a challenge simply to hear and accept God's view of suffering. We live in a world that refuses to look to God's truth for comfort, and we are affected by our world, so the pages of this book may be as disquieting as they are encouraging. I make no apology for that. I believe that God's unsettling truth is much better for us than pillow-soft platitudes.

In other words, this book is more of an inoculation than a remedy. Its aim is to help us arm ourselves with the truth so that we're equipped to suffer well when the time comes.



Nevertheless, I know from my own experience that some will find their way here in the midst of great pain. Whether you are currently suffering greatly or only a little, I would encourage you to read what follows prayerfully, with your Bible open, asking God to help you see the world through his eyes. In the depths of God's riches are truths about suffering that are treasures beyond compare, if you are willing to see them.

However, before we get to God's word, there is something we need to do first. Sometimes, in order to hear the truth, we need to remove the earplugs that keep us from listening properly. All of us have had the experience at some time or another of speaking to someone who doesn't listen to us because they have already made up their mind about what we are saying—and we can be guilty of this ourselves. So often we pretend to listen to others, but all we hear are the stories in our own head. We are in grave danger of doing the same thing when it comes to hearing God's word about suffering.

We've lost touch with biblical truth because of the constant hum of worldly thinking that swirls around in our heads. The first question we need to ask is this: when it comes to suffering, are we prisoners of our age, or slaves to biblical truth?



# Guidebooks for Life

## Bible-based essentials for your Christian journey

If you had to explain to a friend what the Bible says about suffering, what would you say? Paul Grimmond writes:

As I began to write this book, I thought I knew pretty much what I was going to say. But the more I read the Bible, trying to find the right passages to make the points I thought I needed to make, the more uneasy I felt.

Come with Paul and discover the surprises he uncovers as he asks some of the most basic questions of the Christian life: Why do we suffer? And what does it mean to suffer—and even die—well?

### About the author



PAUL GRIMMOND is a gifted and well-known Bible teacher, currently serving on the campus of the University of New South Wales. He is the author of *Right Side Up*, a book about the Christian life, and co-author with Phillip Jensen of *The Archer and the Arrow*, a book about preaching. Paul lives with his wife, Cathy, and their three children in Sydney's east.

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