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## Crushed, but Not Destroyed

### *My Experience with the Goodness of God in Suffering*

*A Christian is someone who shares the sufferings of God in  
the world.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer



#### **The Beginning**

Her water broke around midnight. The expectant young couple scurried around with excitement, as they hopped into their car and started down the dark country road, making their way to the hospital. Their anticipation built as they arrived, elated at the prospect of seeing and holding their firstborn child. After they had checked in, they began the long wait. You could feel their excitement as they discussed their new child.

'What if it's a boy?' the young wife asked.

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'It won't be a boy,' her husband replied. 'It's a girl.'

'But we need a boy's name just in case,' she insisted.

'If it's a boy, you can name him,' replied the soon-to-be father. And their joyous expectancy continued.

Around 1:00 a.m. a nurse entered the room. 'I'm going to remove the fetal monitor so you can try to get some rest,' she explained. As she left the room, the couple settled down to try and get some sleep before the real tumult began. Throughout the next five hours, not one person came into the room to check on the woman or her unborn child. Finally, at around 6:00 a.m., the nurse returned and announced that the doctor had come in unexpectedly early that day and would soon be in their room. She hurriedly repositioned the fetal monitor, then rushed out of the room without even checking any of the readings.

As promised, the doctor soon arrived. As he glanced at the monitor, panic filled his eyes.

'Something's wrong,' he said, forgetting his coolly professional manner. 'The baby is in distress. There's barely a heartbeat!' He checked and found that the child's foot had come through the cervix before dilation. Worse, the umbilical cord had wrapped around the bottom of the foot, cutting off oxygen to the baby. The doctor immediately dispatched orders to the nurses to prepare for an emergency Cesarean. As this was during the shift change, twice as many nurses were running frantically in and out of the room.

How long had the baby been without oxygen? No one knew. It had been five hours since any vitals were taken.

'What is going on?' the new mother worried, her mind flooding with fear.

The medical team quickly performed the emergency C-section, hoping to be wrong about what their training was telling them. The doctor knew that a baby could not survive



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more than two or three minutes without oxygen. He also knew that from the time he had first entered the room, far longer than that scant timeframe had passed. The surgery went as quickly as possible and they delivered a baby boy—a baby the deepest shade of purple a new mom had ever seen. He was lifeless, not even crying due to the lack of oxygen.

‘Why did this happen to my baby?’ wondered the mother behind her tears as they whisked him away to the neonatal intensive care unit. Everyone was in shock, not knowing what to think. Fear was preying on the father’s mind as he chased after the herd of white medical scrubs rushing his baby boy to the intensive-care nursery.

**Hope in the Midst of Pain**



For the next few hours the father returned again and again to take pictures of his son through the glass to show his wife. She couldn’t go and see her child yet, as her legs were still numb from the full spinal they had given her at the time of surgery. The young infant spent that day caged in an incubator, surrounded by medical professionals who were doing their best to keep him alive. It was 10:30 p.m. before the mother was able to visit her new son. It would be a week before they released her from the hospital; but her child remained there for an additional ten days.

Following her release, the young mother spent her days at the hospital rocking her baby as she sang, ‘Jesus loves you, this I know ...’ The young couple were beginning to have a real hope that their child would live. Maybe everything up to this point had just been a bad dream and things would soon return to normal.

However, the doctor later called them aside to speak with them concerning their child’s condition. It became clear that it hadn’t been just a bad dream after all. One can only imagine



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the flood of uncertainty that rose in their minds and hearts as they sat down to speak with the doctor. He tried to muster that calming doctor's voice as he began to explain how their son's condition could be extremely severe. He told them that their son might never walk, talk or care for himself. Though he did his best, this prognosis hit the new parents like a stiff punch in the gut. He went on to suggest that caring for the child might become overwhelming and be too much for one couple to undertake. Just as he began to offer a list of institutions where the child could be placed, the overwrought young mother interrupted him, stating with determination, 'We will care for him ourselves. No matter what it takes, we will raise our son.' That was a huge statement of faith, especially when things seemed so grim. But faith is one thing the Lord gave this couple in plentiful supply, even as they had to walk this seemingly long road of uncertainty.

### **The Journey of Faith**

Even so, when the doctor told them that their son might never be able to walk or talk, his words must have echoed in their minds. It is news that no parent ever wants to hear. There they were, holding their new baby, and as they looked around the nursery, they saw happy, healthy babies; yet their little boy was connected to a heart monitor ... and to a future that seemed so unsure. It was an extremely difficult time for the family. Yet, they knew that God had a plan and that everything would work together for good in the end.

When at last they went home, the mother was so nervous she hyperventilated and had to breathe into a paper bag. The weeks and months that followed were filled with challenges. There were times when they would see children running and playing, and it would fill their hearts and eyes with sadness.



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They worried, 'What if our son doesn't ever get to run and play? What if he doesn't have a normal childhood?' Yet, through God's grace, they fought against all the normal fears and questions that come along with such a situation.

The child was later diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a condition caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain at or around the time of birth, which results in a deficiency of muscle control that can cause impaired speech, mobility and overall muscle dexterity. He soon began physical and occupational therapy. His parents were praying and trusting that God would show His hand and, over time, He did! Their son began to make steady progress. By the age of three he was walking and talking! This was nothing short of the hand of God. Though things weren't perfect, the progress was refreshing for the family.

**How Trials Turn to Gold**

It's always humbling for me to tell this story, because it's my story. It was I who spent the first days of my life caged in an incubator, fighting for my life. I am that child who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy—who doctors thought might never walk or talk or care for myself. The trials that my parents and I have faced have been many, yet God has been particularly faithful to use them for His own glory.

For example, one of the first times I walked in public was on Christmas Sunday. Our church had the tradition of giving out Christmas treat sacks, and everyone would walk to the front of the church to pick up their treat. I don't know what prompted it, but I really wanted to walk up and get my own sack. So, to the amazement of our small congregation and to the glory of God, I walked up by myself, got a treat sack and went and sat in the pastor's lap. Everyone was in shock. There wasn't a dry eye in the building as our family of believers, who had stood in faith with



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my parents, watched as God proved Himself faithful. Needless to say, the main treat that Sunday wasn't apples and candy canes, but the demonstration of God's power as I walked to the front of the church.

As I grew older I adapted to life with my disability. My grade-school years were bittersweet. I was able to be in regular education classes with the help of a personal aid, but I was laughed at and made fun of constantly. This really hurt and affected my early childhood years. I wondered why I had to be different; thinking about it often brought me to tears. However, the laughter seemed to subside as I got older and I began to enjoy school and being around my peers. I think that age and maturity taught me how to better deal with being disabled. When kids saw that my disability wasn't a big deal to me, it suddenly wasn't a big deal to them either.

The Lord was also at work in another area of my life. Around the age of seven or eight, I became increasingly aware of my personal need for Christ to be my Savior. I really can't explain it. It was more than fleeting childhood emotions. The grace of God started dealing with my young heart in wonderfully precious ways. Though I can't recall an actual date and time when I was saved, I can most definitely recall the season of life when God saved me by His grace as I passed out of death and into glorious life. I immediately began to hunger for the things of God. On Sundays I would skip children's church so I could go into the main worship service, where I would often spend the worship hour weeping in the presence of God.

I was too young to know quite what was going on, and I certainly didn't have any theological understanding of what was taking place. But I knew God was at work. I remember having such joy in my later childhood and into my teenage years. The Lord placed in me an appetite for His Word and for prayer.



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The things of God continued to exhilarate me as I experienced His presence at greater and greater intensities.

Upon completion of high school I went to college and studied theology. I had felt called to ministry since I was very young. Though I can't say why I should have been so drawn to ministry, outside of God's divine plan, it has always seemed to be a burden that God has placed on my heart. I've tried to answer that call in various ways as I've grown older; from writing short devotionals and leading teen Bible studies to starting school prayer gatherings and spending Friday nights at the mall witnessing, I've always been active in some type of ministry.

My childhood and adolescent years had plenty of ups and downs. While I thank God for all the up times, I have also learned the necessity of thanking Him for the down times as well. Those down times have been used by the Lord to teach me about His goodness in times of suffering.

Now, at the age of twenty-seven, I know that having cerebral palsy (CP) was an act of the grace of God. Anything else would have been outside the scope of divine wisdom. On the practical—yet profoundly spiritual—side, think of how CP preserved me. Psalm 116:6 says, *'The Lord preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me.'*

I never dated much. Girls didn't seem to want to go out with the handicapped kid. But because of that I was saved from the hormonally-infested high school dating scene, which has led many down a dark road of sexual promiscuity and perversion, ending in guilt and shame. Similarly, I was never seduced into attending any high school parties, introduced to alcohol or induced to dabble with any types of drugs. Certainly all of this can be avoided without having to endure cerebral palsy; yet in my life I've seen the Lord use CP to preserve me and keep me in the grace of God.



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Even more profound are the more spiritual ways in which God has used CP in my life. I began to seek Him earnestly at a very young age. My young spirit knew that God alone had the ability to heal me, which incited me to press into Him as hard as I could. As I grew older I began to understand that whether God healed my CP or not was in His hands; but I began to see an even greater need: to be healed of the sin-sickness we are all born with. My most pressing request of God was not that He would heal my physical body, but that He would purify all that was in me. This act of grace, known as sanctification, has been an ongoing work and is the greatest miracle anyone could ever ask for.

### **Beauty and Grace**

God's grace upon my life has continued to amaze me, even as I've gotten older. Meeting the woman who would become my wife is one of those moments of grace I'll never forget.

I remember the first time I saw her. I was standing across the room from her, not knowing who she was; but I knew there was something special about her. I had never dated much, but there was something different about this girl.

It was time. I had to call her. I was more nervous than I had ever been. Trying to keep my hand steady, I dialed the number. I heard the phone ring, and ring, and ring again. Finally, I heard the sweetest voice. 'Hello,' she said.

'Hi Suerene, it's Jam—' I was cut off as she said, 'What? I can't hear you.' I tried harder to speak as clearly as I could. 'Hey, Suerene ...'. However, I heard, 'What? I can't understand you.' Great. It was the first time I'd tried to ask a girl out and she couldn't understand me. I thought, 'This isn't fair. Why do I have to have CP?' In my embarrassment I started to hang up the phone, but waited just long enough to hear her voice say,



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'Just kidding, this is Suerene, leave me a message.' I had been wrestling with her outgoing voicemail message! I had mixed emotions at that point. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. Instead I left a message asking that she call me. A few weeks later we went out together, on the first of many dates we would share. Now, six years later as I'm writing this book, we're about to celebrate seven years of marriage. It's been an amazing time. We've already made some wonderful memories; but we've also had to walk down some difficult roads together.

Suerene became pregnant almost a year into our marriage. Although it was sooner than we had expected, we were very excited. My wife had a very normal pregnancy, but at the last ultrasound we saw that our baby boy was smaller than normal. We were told that we didn't have anything to worry about. However, we would soon learn that this was not completely true.

#### **The Day That Changed My Life**

Two weeks before our due date we were walking into church when Suerene's water broke. I immediately went into Barney Fife mode, running back and forth, trying to figure out what to do. My parents were inside the church, so I went to get them. I found my mom and tried to whisper, 'Suerene's water just broke.' However, since whispering is difficult for someone with CP, I think half the church heard me. So my mom (and dad, and sister, and the lady behind them, and the pastor) followed me out into the hall. By this time Suerene (whom I had abandoned in order to take up my messenger duties) had made her way into the restroom. A nurse who attended our church came to check on her, and soon we were heading for the hospital.

Before long we had arrived at the hospital and checked in, excitedly waiting for whatever came next. It was a long wait,



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filled with much anticipation. Suerene had wanted a natural birth. We spent hours looking into each other's eyes as I tried to help her get through the contractions. Several hours later she decided that natural childbirth wasn't for her after all, and she would experience the wonder and bliss of God's special gift, known as an epidural. The next day at 3:20 p.m., Suerene gave birth to the most amazing 4 lb. 12 oz. baby boy I had ever seen. We were ecstatic! Suerene tried to nurse him, but it seemed he wasn't ready to eat yet.

The whole room was filled with joy. Soon we had grandparents, great grandparents and friends in the room with us. It was a festival of excitement as everyone took turns holding our new baby, Judah.

About an hour later, a nurse came in to take Judah's measurements and give him his first bath. She told us he'd be back in the room in about an hour. I grabbed our camera—time to take pictures as they measured him and gave him his bath. I was having the time of my life taking pictures of my new son. The newfound joys of parenthood were overwhelming.

However, when the nurses tried to feed him, things got complicated. Judah wouldn't take the bottle. They continued to try to feed him, and he continued not to drink. We knew then that there was a problem, and I began to panic. They asked me to leave the room, which initially angered me. If something was wrong with my boy, I wanted to be with him. However, I obliged them. After trying to feed him several more times they realized that he couldn't swallow. They would have to do some tests to find out why.

This would be the day I learned another great lesson about the goodness of God in suffering.

I had knots in the pit of my stomach as I walked down the hall. I had to tell my wife that something was wrong with our



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precious new baby boy. How could I tell her? What would I say? How would Suerene react?

As I opened the wide hospital door, I saw her lying peacefully in bed. Love and compassion overwhelmed me. When I finally found the words to tell Suerene about our little Judah, the fear on her face reminded me of why I didn't like hospitals. Suddenly everything seemed bleak—cold and sterile. It was as though we were going back in time to the night I was born. After the initial shock and a few tears, we began to talk. Like my parents had, we decided we were going to trust God and hope for the best.

The medical team took an X-ray to see if there was any type of blockage, but the results were unclear. The doctor explained, 'It appears that Judah has a very small opening in his esophagus. It may be due to his small size.' However, we soon learned that things weren't so simple. Judah's esophagus didn't connect with his stomach. In fact, it dead-ended. We also learned that he had an extra opening going to his trachea. This odd malformation is known as an esophageal tracheal fistula. The next day we would travel to Arkansas' Children's Hospital, where they would correct the malformations via surgery.

I was told all of this before Suerene knew it. Once again, I went back to her room and asked everyone if I could speak privately with my wife. I was tired of having to give her such news. What had seemed merely difficult before now seemed impossible. My wife had just gone through childbirth; now she had to deal with the dreadful uncertainties of the unknown.

After everyone left, I explained to her all that the doctor had told me. We sat there for several minutes and cried together. The very air seemed thick with gloom. Uncertainty can be so hard to deal with.

I remember thinking about the irony of the situation. I now sat in the same hospital I had been born in, with all the



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complications that had accompanied that time; but now it was my own little boy whose future was unsure. I'll admit that I had a moment in the flesh. I thought, 'You know, Lord, it doesn't seem fair. With all I've gone through in life, why do I have to go through this?' The Lord soon answered that question.

### **Sinai in a Waiting Room**

By this time the waiting room was filled with family and friends who were waiting to hear the results of the tests that had been run that day. I went and spoke to the large group, explaining all that had transpired. Uncertainty filled the room. I could see it on so many faces. 'We're going to trust God,' I said, 'and we know He will work all things for good.' We had a time of prayer, which was very precious. Soon after that, people began to leave.

Things didn't calm down until around 11:00 that night. The whole day had been an emotional roller coaster. After everyone left, the impact of the day was weighing on my mind. It felt like a heaviness was on me; like I couldn't breathe. I knew I needed fresh air; so after everyone left, I went alone to a quiet waiting room, needing desperately to hear from the Lord. The Lord began to speak to my heart. I'll never forget what I heard ...

'It would be easy for you to say, "God, this isn't fair." Many people in your situation would say that. But I want you to know that all My ways are just; everything I do is right and true.'

I was in awe. In a moment I understood what God was saying to me, and I began to tell Him how just and right the events of the day were. Though it offends the wisdom of man and hurt my own flesh, I knew that He was in complete control. I began to tell God how right He was for allowing our baby boy to be born with such a condition, and prayed that everything would be used to glorify Christ. I left that waiting room feeling as though I were leaving Sinai, and I repeatedly told God of His justice.



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How could I come to such a conclusion? That night as I sat in the waiting room, my mind was filled with a series of thoughts. First, did God know what was going to happen before it actually occurred? Yes. God, who formed and fashioned Judah in the womb, knew that Judah's esophagus didn't connect with his stomach and He knew my son had an extra opening going to his trachea. Could God have fixed it before Judah's birth? Again, the answer was obvious: Yes. I know firsthand of God's healing power. Did God choose to heal Judah and thus cure his condition? I had to be honest. No, He didn't. Judah was born with an esophageal tracheal fistula. God could have prevented it, but He did not. So, was it wise for God not to heal Judah? Yes. Everything God does, He does in supreme wisdom. Was it fair that our baby had all these problems? By grace I answered, 'Yes.' Everything God does is just. Knowing all this, I deduced that there was a reason that God, in His power and sovereignty, unfolded things the way He did. Later, that reason became quite clear.

I was in another waiting room several days later at Arkansas' Children's Hospital. I was reading in the Book of John about the blind man who was brought to Jesus. Someone asked Jesus, '*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*' Jesus answered, '*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but [this man was born blind so] that the works of God should be revealed in him*' (John 9:2-3). Why would Jesus want the works of His Father to be manifested? The answer would come out of John chapter 17: '*Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You"*' (John 17:1).

Jesus wanted the works of the Father to be manifested so that the Father would receive the glory due His name. The



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whole reason this man had been born blind was so the Father could be glorified as Jesus healed him. This idea ran contrary to what I had learned as I grew up. I had believed that it was never God's will that someone be sick. Sickness was of the devil! You just needed to exercise your faith! Yet John's account shows that God had a specific purpose for the man's disability. He was born blind for a reason which was known only within the heart of God: that He be glorified in such a way as to bring life and hope to those who saw the miracle of healing Christ was to bring.

Satan didn't cause that man to be born blind; God did. As I pondered these things, new thoughts began to click for me. Satan didn't cause me to be born with cerebral palsy; God did. Satan didn't cause my son to have the problems he had; God did, and He did so in kindness, so that my son and Suerene and I could be used to glorify God in the unfolding of His purpose. I count all my suffering to be of the highest honor, because I see that the end purpose is the exaltation of God forever. As a Christian that is my ultimate goal; that my life glorifies Christ, in wellness or suffering. How easy it is to speak of honoring Christ when all is well. But what will we do and who will we show ourselves to be in the midnight hour, when it seems all of hell is raging against us? This is the test of true faith brought about by the Spirit of God.

As I write, Judah is six years old. What a joy he is! Judah is one of the most happy and loving kids you could ever meet. We've learned that he has a rare chromosome deletion that causes severe development delay. Judah began walking when he was three years old. He is still essentially non-verbal; though he makes some sounds and speaks a few words. His speech is affected by a condition called Oral Apraxia. While gaining full use of speech is possible for him, it will be hard-fought for. In spite of all this, the Lord is using this journey with Judah to



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teach Suerene and me so much about faith, trust and patience; He is fostering in us, though the trials of our son, beautiful sanctification.

My goal throughout the remainder of this book is to affirm biblically that God ordains suffering for the ultimate good of man. I encourage you as you read this book to prayerfully consider the truths found in it. God has a plan for suffering. It's a good plan that attests to His unfathomable goodness. Join me as we see the goodness of God in suffering.

