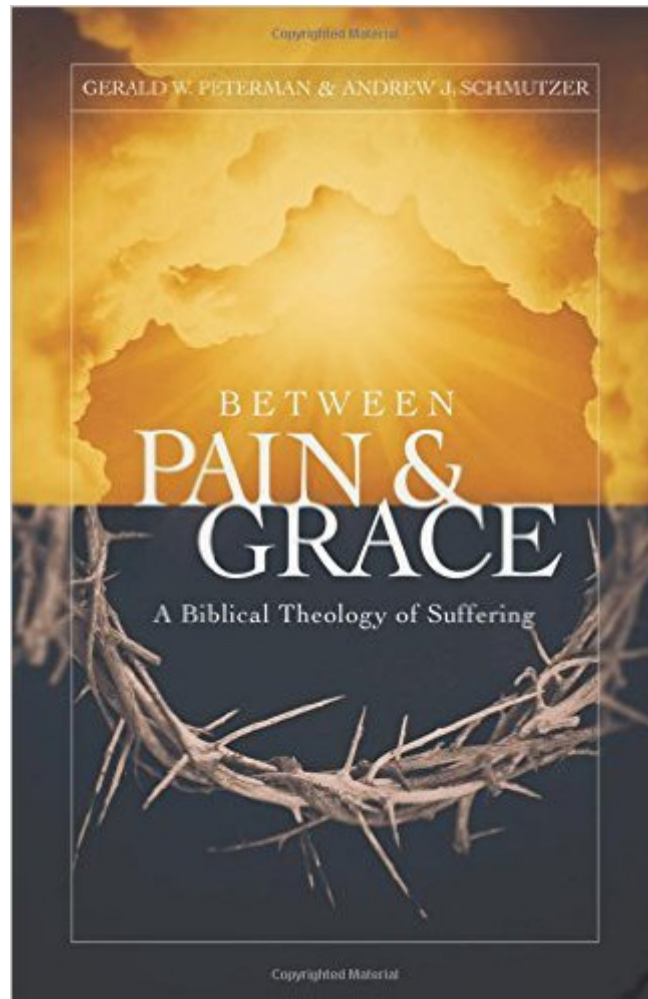


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Between Pain And Grace: A Biblical Theology Of Suffering



Synopsis

Why does suffering exist? When will it end? Where is God in it? Despite how common suffering is, we still struggle to understand it, and even more, to bear through it. *Between Pain and Grace* gets to the heart of this struggle. Born from a popular college course on suffering, this book answers many of our critical questions, like: Is God personally involved in our pain and suffering? How should Christians handle emotions like grief and anger? What does the Bible say about issues like mental illness, sexual abuse, and betrayal? Striking an elegant balance between being scholarly on the one hand and heartfelt on the other, *Between Pain and Grace* is useful both in the classroom and for personal reading. The authors pull together Scripture, personal experiences, and even psychological research to offer a well-rounded and trustworthy take on suffering. *Between Pain and Grace* will give you confidence in God's sovereignty, comfort in His presence, and wisdom for life this side of paradise.

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Customer Reviews

American Christians don't know how to suffer well. On the one hand, we think the life of faith should be victorious and joyful, so suffering seems like a defeat and a downer. On the other hand, because suffering seems like a defeat and a downer, it must be caused by insufficient faith or obedience on our part. Neither hand is biblical, of course. Instead, both reflect the chirpy optimism and can-do individualism of modern culture. If it's going to be, we often hear, it's up to me. The corollary of this sentiment is obvious but ignored:

if it doesn't happen, it's my fault. What American Christians need is a biblical theology of suffering—one that recognizes life's hardness without blaming the victims. Between Pain and Grace by Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer does just that. It situates Christian experience smack dab in the middle of the now-but-not-yet of the gospel: In our current metanarrative—the overarching narrative of human life for those of Christian faith—we find two opposing qualities existing side by side; indeed, they are sometimes mixed together. First, there is death and those things that go along with it, such as suffering, sin, frustration, betrayal, violence, corruption, and groaning. Second, there are blessings of the gospel: new life, redemption, the indwelling Spirit, adoption, hope, life in God's community, and ongoing transformation. Truly, the Christian life means to exist between two worlds: the old world of sin, alienation, and death and the new world of righteousness, holiness, and life. Until Christ returns, this both-and quality cannot be resolved. God alone can wipe every tear from their eyes with finality (Revelation 21:4). That doesn't mean there are no actions the Christian community can take to ameliorate existing suffering or to prevent future suffering. We can and must do both. Indeed, God always uses human agents to carry his plan forward (emphasis in original). Still, suffering is an intrinsic part of life in the present age, so it is a duty of Christians to understand it better so they can minister to its victims with greater compassion and healing. The authors contribute to a better understanding of suffering by outlining the basics of affliction in Scripture in chapter 1. Chapter 2 turns to the relational ecosystem of sin and suffering, that is, the relationship of God to humanity, of humans to one another, to animals, and to the inanimate created order. Chapters 3 and 4 are theological. They describe the suffering of God and of Jesus. Against classical philosophical theism, which teaches that God does not suffer, and against panentheism, which teaches that God is not sovereign over suffering, the authors describe God as a caring King, the One characterized by willing vulnerability (emphasis in original). Chapter 5 argues that the Church needs to recover the practice of lamentation, that is, the language of lament. The lament—whether individual or corporate—is the most common form of prayer in the Psalms. Contemporary Christians are often uncomfortable with laments—frank complaining to God—e.g., My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1). Without lament, however, sufferers can't make sense of what's happening to or in themselves. The very structure of lament brings shape to the formlessness of suffering. For me personally, this was the best chapter in the book. The remaining chapters discuss a variety of topics: redemptive anger (chapter 6); suffering, prayer,

and worldview (chapter 7); leadership and tears (chapter 8); family toxins (chapter 9); sexual abuse (chapter 10); mental illness (chapter 11); and the role of the Christian community in ameliorating and preventing suffering (chapter 12). Each of these chapters mines Scripture for wisdom on the topics, as well as draws on the best of the social sciences. The discussion of family toxins in chapter 9, for example, puts the story of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) into fruitful dialogue with family systems therapy. It is a tour de force. Chapter 13 brings the book to a conclusion by reflecting on the metanarrative of Scripture, which progresses in the arc of Creation, Devastation, Restoration. In Christ, God's devastated creation is being restored at the individual, social, and cosmic levels. Between Pain and Grace is not always easy reading, and like most books on hard topics, readers will find all sorts of nits to pick. Nonetheless, Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer have written a valuable treatment of a difficult subject. I highly recommend it.

Elisabeth Elliot coined the most memorable definition of human suffering that I have ever heard: Suffering is wanting what you don't have or having what you don't want. These words came to mind often as I read Between Pain and Grace, because Gerald W. Peterman and Andrew J. Schmutzer have initiated a fresh conversation which does not claim to be the last word on suffering, but is characterized by the scope, depth, and fidelity one would expect from two of Moody Bible Institute's theology professors. My attention was arrested immediately by the authors' careful distinction between pain and suffering. Consider this: Pain is primarily objective, external, and typically social or physical as opposed to personal and mental. Suffering is primarily subjective, internal, and typically mental or emotional. This distinction is important because not all pain is received as suffering just ask an Olympic gymnast or a brand-new mum. Conversely, those with leprosy or diabetic neuropathy would welcome pain as a means to alleviate the suffering that occurs when they injure their insensitive extremities. Dr. Eric Cassell chimes in with the succinct conclusion that the only way to learn whether suffering is present is to ask the sufferer. A biblical theology of suffering must include the truth that Scripture provides a voice for those who suffer; it acknowledges the reality of innocent suffering; and, without moralizing, it affirms the presence of God in the midst of pain. I never tire of hearing the truth that God is fluent in the language of lament. He has graciously appointed script writers in the psalms and prophets, and throughout Scripture, honest expressions of grief are portrayed as a natural exhale of

worship. Because a lively faith is open to the uncomfortable questions and painful stories of those who suffer, the church gathered must be clear in its identity as a safe place for the expression of grief and disappointment. Counselors, individuals dealing with dysfunctional families, and those who have experienced sexual abuse or who are dealing in some way with mental illness will appreciate the authors' frank discussion of these topics as they relate to what the Scripture says about pain and suffering. The term "relational ecosystem" runs as a theme throughout *Between Pain and Grace*, affirming the fact that there is no such thing as a private or contained sin. The relational ecosystem of God's creation has been shaken to its roots by sin, and this is seen at every level: God with mankind; man with woman; humanity with animals; and humanity with the ground. Brokenness abounds and the outcome is alienation. Anger sends out generational shock waves that are amply illustrated in Old Testament family dysfunction. Peterman and Schmutzer refer to David's family life as a "relational debris field," acknowledging that we all are part of "interlocking relationships" that surround us "like the rings of a tree." Our relational ecosystem, tangled as it is in personal weakness and sin (another fascinating distinction that the authors delineate), demonstrates the efficacy of the redemption that comes to us in the midst of our brokenness. Because God Himself chose a path of vulnerability for His Son, the record of Scripture is that God experiences pain and "a theology of a suffering God is evident throughout the testimony of Scripture." God's transcendence is balanced by His immanence, as evidenced in His compassionate love, His relatedness with His creation, and His willingness to risk relationally. Looking at The Lord's Prayer through the lens of pain gives it a fresh application, for in Matthew 6, Jesus provides a model for prayer in a suffering world, a challenge to transcend our worries and pain by focusing first on God's honor, God's good, and God's moral requirements. Opening one's life to spiritual leadership roles also opens the door to some unique forms of suffering "rejection, hopelessness, and discontentment. We follow a Savior who entered into suffering voluntarily. Peterman and Schmutzer assert that leaders have likewise made that choice, but then offer the encouragement that tears shed are part of the leader's path to Christ-likeness. Since suffering is unavoidable on a fallen planet, this question is also unavoidable for the thinking believer: What needs to happen in the space between pain and grace? For most people (including the Apostle Paul!), it holds a journey of acceptance, a yielding of expectations, and most important of all, a commitment to receive the gift of suffering from the hand of an all-wise and sovereign God.//This book was provided by Moody Publishers in exchange for my review. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade

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Very thoughtful and thought-provoking exploration of scripture in light of the human condition and suffering. This book is in sharp contrast to those which have either dramatic, cathartic stories with lessons, those whose experience with suffering is relatively minimal and thus have superficial solutions, and those which are theologically dense for pastors only. The chapter on mental illness and the church is especially unique in that it addresses it at all, and in that it is so accurate and compassionate. I did not find this to be academic or over the heads of most people, but a very well done, serious treatment of a serious subject.

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