Those who see the “sweet” side of suffering are usually believers who have learned to lean hard on the grace of Jesus through every hurt and heartache. It’s a good description for Esther Lovejoy as she opens her heart in *The Sweet Side of Suffering*. Congratulations, Esther, on compiling stirring insights from God’s Word that will bless and inspire the reader.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Author and founder, Joni and Friends
International Disability Center

Esther Lovejoy wisely concludes that even in our deepest valleys, we may know the strength and intimacy that God affords us through the ministry of His precious Word. Her book is to be commended not only because it is born out of her work as a teacher and counselor but especially as a fellow traveler through the vale of tears and seasons of questions. There is a compassion, hope, and encouragement in these pages for the reader.

Ravi Zacharias
Author and speaker

Esther’s experience of suffering not only takes you to Calvary, it takes you through Calvary into the closest communion with Christ, our Wounded Healer. Her testimony of personal suffering gives liberty for those in pain to allow their grief to carry them into the presence of the Lord and to experience Him in the deepest way.

Dominic Herbst, M.S., M.A.
Therapist, consultant, and public speaker
Founder and president, Bethesda Family Services Foundation
Author, *Restoring Relationships*
Engaging and inspiring, this book provides hope for those who otherwise are hopeless. The author, who herself has experienced much disappointment and pain, has a wonderful narrative style that allows her to communicate what can be gained by a biblically informed understanding of suffering in a deeply insightful yet practical way. Read this book. It is time and effort well spent. Your experience of suffering will not be the same.

Peter C. Hill, Ph.D.
Professor and Undergraduate Chair,
Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University
Editor, Journal of Psychology and Christianity
Co-Editor, Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling

Esther Lovejoy speaks from the crucible of her own deep experiences. She has suffered, and she found what she calls “the sweet side of suffering” when she fellowshipped with the Savior in the Garden alone. Her message in this book is a helpful one for all of us who find ourselves in the midst of the dark places.

Dr. Thomas P. Bailey
Professor emeritus and past president,
Nyack College and Alliance Theological Seminary
the sweet side of suffering

Recognizing God’s Best
When Facing Life’s Worst

M. Esther Lovejoy
To my mother, Mary McGarvey,
who laid a solid foundation from which I could learn these truths,
and continues to sweetly display all that she has taught.
Contents

Acknowledgments 9
Introduction 13

1. The Sweetness of His Voice 21
2. The Sweetness of Knowing God 33
3. The Sweetness of His Care 47
4. The Sweetness of Surrender 61
5. The Sweetness of Shared Suffering 75
6. The Sweetness of His Comfort 87
7. The Sweetness of His Names 99
8. The Sweetness of His Grace 115
9. The Sweetness of His Correction 127
10. The Sweetness of Hope 137

Notes 147
Scripture Index 151
About the Author 155
Acknowledgments

For me it began at the age of eight at a little red table decorated with nursery rhyme decals. I placed a blank piece of paper on the table, thoughtfully picked up a #2 pencil, and began my first book. It bore the lofty title *When Revival Comes*, inspired by a passion for revival that was my father’s and a passion for writing that was my own. The “book” was never finished, and its few pages are long gone, but the dream of that eight-year-old girl has remained.

A. W. Tozer said, “The only book that should ever be written is one that flows up from the heart . . . You should never write a book unless you just have to.” Over the years I’ve thought of many things I could write about, but nothing had to be written—until now. The deep desire to express what I’ve learned through suffering has finally met Tozer’s qualifications.

God has used many people to bring about the fulfillment of a young girl’s dream, and I want to express my sincere thanks for their encouragement and help along the way.

Dave Fessenden—you have been a friend, an encourager, and a light along a new and unfamiliar path. Thanks for your guidance.
The Sweet Side of Suffering

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Judy Markham—thank you for your touch on these words that brought clarity to this important message. You have been wise and gentle—the perfect combination for an editor.

And a thank you that can’t be fully expressed to my wonderful (and patient) husband who has lovingly nagged this book into existence. Thank you for believing that dreams can come true.
“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years . . . and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.”

Genesis 15:13–14
**Introduction**

“I will give you the treasures of darkness, 
riches stored in secret places, 
so that you may know that I am the Lord, 
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.”

*Isaiah 45:3*

In the sixties, a popular folk song by Joni Mitchell expressed the idea that even after looking at love from both sides, it was still the illusions of love that were remembered. I’ve looked at suffering from both sides now, and it leaves no illusions. Suffering is a reality that demands our full attention. Whether in the midst of suffering, or looking back on it, you are left with no false impressions about the pain and heartache that encompass it. But suffering offers something else—something that is equally real. It offers a wonderfully surprising sweet side.

I have shared the sufferings of many people in my years of ministry, and now, in more recent years, I have experienced suffering firsthand. And while I know suffering from “both sides now,” I also know its unexpected joys, its value and
worth, the treasures that are found only in the dark places. Most of all, I know, in a deeper and more personal way, the Man of Sorrows who has walked with me every step.

Max Lucado declares, “A season of suffering is a small price to pay for a close view of God.” This doesn’t minimize the suffering, but points out the value of all that we gain in return.

For most of us, suffering is not a choice. It is forced on us; it rudely interrupts our lives and demands our full attention. Given the choice, we would not welcome suffering into our lives in any form, but we’re usually not given that choice. We are, however, given another choice and that is the choice of how we respond to this intruder.

It’s important to understand from the very onset of this book that the sweet side of suffering is not automatically granted to everyone who suffers. We have all seen the bitterness and anger that suffering can produce. We have known those who have never recovered from the onslaught of its pain and heartache, or those who have chosen a permanent escape rather than face the hopelessness they’ve felt in their personal suffering. For these, a sweet side never existed. In fact, for many, the thought that suffering could have even an element of sweetness is a laughable, foolish, unattainable myth.

It’s also important to understand that while the sweet side of suffering is not immediately apparent, it can be found. It’s the “treasures of darkness” recorded by David in the psalms—treasures that have to be sought. It’s the “gold by moonlight” experienced by Amy Carmichael—gold that must be mined. The sweet side of suffering can be found, and I would go further and say that to come out of any experience of suffering whole, it must be found.

A beautiful illustration of this principle is found in the
story of the nation of Israel and their exodus from Egypt—the land of their suffering. God must have appeared indifferent, or even heartless, to these slaves as the promise of freedom was snatched from them time after time. But God’s timing was perfect, and when they left they took with them the plunder of Egypt (Exodus 12:36). The very source of their suffering became the source of great riches. And so it can be for us.

Paul says to the Galatians, “Have you suffered so much for nothing?” (Galatians 3:4). For our purposes, Paul could be asking, “Have you suffered so much without experiencing the sweet side?” What a sad commentary on someone’s experience of suffering—to have gone through it for nothing. And yet I have found that to be the experience of many people.

Why waste suffering? When it forces its way into our lives, when it intrudes upon our orderly world unbidden, why not squeeze out of it every good thing, every ounce of value that it can possibly offer. Why not use it rather than be its victim? The only difference between meaningless suffering and the value of suffering is into whose hand we place it.

Years ago I drew a primitive picture to illustrate this thought. In the first scene, suffering is placed in the hands of our enemy, Satan, and becomes a tool of destruction. You see him hammering away, using it to destroy and shatter his victim. In the second scene, suffering is placed in the hands of our loving Savior who wields it only to create function and great beauty. Same tool. Often the same pain. But far different results. Satan’s only objective is our total defeat. God’s concern is always for the greater good—our best and His glory. Satan’s hands are prompted by a heart of pure evil and hatred. God’s hands are inspired by unfailing love and goodness. Both can hurt, but only one has a sweet side.
The intention of this book is not to delve into an explanation for suffering, or to be a forum for debating the “whys” of pain. Furthermore, it is not my purpose to defend or explain God. Nor is this an effort to get you to “put on a happy face,” to look on the bright side, or to develop a Pollyanna attitude. Instead, it is my prayer that my words and my experience will be an encouragement for those who are suffering. I want to cheer you on, to pull you out of the awful heaviness of despair and give you hope. I want to point you to the One who can bring hope and healing, comfort and guidance through the murky, dreadful mire of suffering.

I want you to not just read about the sweet side of suffering, but to personally find and experience it. That can only come through the hands that have scars as an eternal reminder of how He suffered for us. The One who brings sweetness has experienced the full extent of human suffering—and He did have a choice!

Another important thing to note is that suffering is still suffering. There is still pain and heartache involved. There are still unanswered questions and struggles with very human emotions.

I remember, some years ago, coming upon a group of women talking in glowing terms to a younger woman about to have her first baby. They were far enough removed from their own experiences of childbirth that they spoke of it in sentimental terms. It was “the most wonderful experience a woman could have,” “such fulfillment,” “the greatest joy.” And on and on they went. Having gone through the experience of labor and delivery fairly recently, I added this little tidbit of reality as I walked by: “And it will hurt!”

Later the new mother shared with me how thankful she
Introduction

was that I had added those words. She said that she was feeling so defeated during childbirth because there was a lot of pain and not a lot of euphoria. Then she remembered my words, “And it will hurt!” She was grateful for that reminder.

I don’t want to be guilty of making the same mistake as I talk about suffering that those women did as they spoke in such glowing terms about childbirth. While I share the wonders of the hidden joys that can be found during suffering, I don’t want to ignore the fact that it is still suffering. So let me say it again, “And it will hurt!” It is the fact that there can be true sweetness in the midst of some of our deepest human pain that is so amazing. It may hurt so bad. But the good news is that it can also hurt so good.

My oldest daughter was born with a minor problem with her left leg. It was slightly twisted. While there was no immediate risk, there was the potential for more serious problems later in her life. The doctor offered us two possible solutions. One was to wait a few months and have her fitted for a brace that would gradually (and painfully) pull that leg into line. The other was to take advantage of the softness and flexibility of her newborn bones and work immediately to straighten them. He strongly recommended the latter. We trusted his judgment and agreed to do whatever was necessary to straighten that little leg.

The decision was easy; the reality of what that involved was much harder. A couple of times each day I had to take Debbie’s little foot and gently turn it. The only way I knew that I had turned it enough was when she cried.

I had waited a lifetime (or so it seemed) to be a mother. I had wanted babies from the time I wasn’t one. My husband and I were married almost six long and worrisome years
before Debbie, our first child, finally arrived. And now I was to take this precious baby and twist her foot twice a day until it hurt enough for her to cry out.

How could I possibly do such a thing to my child? How could I intentionally inflict pain on one I loved so much? I’ll tell you how. I could do it for the simple reason that I knew it was for her best; I knew that it would spare her more pain and suffering in later years.

And so twice a day I took that adorable little foot in my hand—a hand that at all other times was gentle and tender—and twisted until she cried. Until we both cried. My only motive was love. My only concern was her best. I would look down at that precious little girl and know that she couldn’t possibly understand what was in my heart. She only felt what came from my hands.

The parallels are obvious. God loves us. There aren’t words to convey the depths of His love, although there is a cross that gives us a glimpse of its depths. My love for Debbie pales in comparison. Yet I was willing, for her sake, to do what she could not possibly understand; in fact, what she could easily misunderstand or mistake for cruelty.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declared the Lord to His people, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). And sometimes He has to twist our foot to accomplish what He knows is best.

I love to talk about God, and I can’t wait to share Him with you through these pages. I love to talk about His faithfulness
and love during my own suffering, but that brings with it a dilemma. How much of my story should I share? I need you to know that I am not writing from a vacuum or just expressing theory. I need to share with you some of my own pain and heartache so that it can be the backdrop against which you can best see God’s goodness and mercy.

Often suffering catches us by surprise. It was that way for me. My husband, who was a pastor, arrived to pick me up as usual one day, and when I got in the car, he turned to me and said, “We’re leaving the ministry.” I was stunned! Ministry was our calling and our lives. But what came next was even more stunning. I learned that he had been living a hidden life of sin that spanned the entire thirty years of our marriage. His involvement in various sinful activities was serious enough that he was not only removed from ministry, but eventually stripped of his ordination. Sadly, it also destroyed our marriage.

Those are the facts most simply stated. But the reality of those facts left me with an overwhelming sense of betrayal and a depth of emotional pain that cannot be expressed in words. However, it was also during those difficult days that I felt as never before the presence and unfailing love of my Savior and learned many important lessons about the sweet side of suffering.

God, in His infinite goodness, brought “beauty from ashes” as I later married my high school sweetheart. Peter and I have a tremendous marriage that is wonderfully summed up by my new last name—Lovejoy! However, we too have faced some times of deep suffering and the lessons have continued.

In the years of our marriage we have struggled to keep a business afloat, resulting in years of financial hardship.
The Sweet Side of Suffering

Eventually, we lost our business and, subsequently, our home. I have fought discouragement, despair, fear, and even depression, and you will hear the echo of those in these pages. And yet these years have also brought a new depth of understanding of the reality of that sweetness that is unique to suffering. Would I want to live a minute of those years over again? Absolutely not! But neither do I regret those years of struggles as God revealed himself to us in new and deeper ways.

There are also other instances of suffering too personal to share, but suffering is not unique to me. Many others have suffered—many in worse ways than I have experienced. But the joy celebrated in this book is that the sweet side of suffering is also not unique to me. It is there because of God alone, and it is offered to all of His children who find themselves “in the midst.”

When the author Robert Louis Stevenson was a small child, he was staring out the window of his home on a dark night watching the lamplighter work his way down the street. When his mother asked Robert what he was doing, he replied, “I’m watching that man poke holes in the darkness.”

Times of suffering can be times of tremendous darkness of soul. It is my prayer that these pages will help poke holes in the darkness and bring God’s light and encouragement to those who are in the midst of the dark night of suffering.