

RECOGNIZING GOD'S BEST
WHEN FACING LIFE'S WORST

STUDY GUIDE

the sweet side *of* suffering



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Introduction

“Is there a study guide?” I’ve heard that question often enough to prompt me to put together these pages to assist in the study of *The Sweet Side of Suffering*. Whether you’re part of a group or studying on your own, I trust that this will be a benefit and blessing to you.

My sister offered a copy of *The Sweet Side of Suffering* to a friend who was going through a difficult time. She stared at the title of the book for a minute, then looked up at Carol and said, “Really? Is she crazy?”

I can understand that reaction. *Sweetness* and *suffering* are not words that naturally go together. The idea that there can be sweetness in some of our deepest pain may seem “crazy,” but the message of this book is that God can bring those two words together. He can add sweetness to our bitterest times of sorrow and suffering. It is my prayer that this study guide will add a deeper level to your understanding of this truth.

The study for each chapter will use the same format. The sections are listed and explained below.

Preparing to Listen

“I will listen to what God the Lord will say” (Psalm 85:8).

We’ve all had people (often our own children or spouse) who appear to be listening but aren’t really hearing what we’re saying. What do we do first? We get their attention. I want this part of the study to do just that—to draw our attention to God, to focus on Him so that we can hear what He wants to say to us.

Pondering God’s Word

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18).

David had a deep reverence and love for the Word of God. I am even more impressed with his reverence when I remember that David’s Scripture was probably only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. He didn’t have the Gospels that reveal the life of Christ or Acts that tells of the early days of the church. He never read Paul’s letters or John’s great and glorious Revelation. We have so much more than David ever did but often don’t have his passion for God’s Word.

In this part of the study, we will look at each chapter in light of God’s Word as we wait to hear from Him. Prayerfully ponder the verses found in this section of the study, and allow God to teach you through His Word.

Pausing to Reflect

“Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (Psalm 51:6).

This section of the study will become more personal as we reflect on how the truths of each chapter can have meaning in our own lives. These are truths I’ve found through living, not through studying—and, more specifically, through living through suffering. It’s my prayer that you will do more than just nod your head in agreement with what is written, but will allow these truths to have practical application to your own life and circumstances. This is what I like to refer to as “applied theology.” How wonderful that God’s truth is meant to be personal.

Praying in Response

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry” (Psalm 34:15).

We can listen, we can study, we can agree, but all of these need to be followed by a response to God’s truth. In my own personal journals, I love to respond to God’s teaching with a written prayer. That enables me to express my heart, my commitment, and my desires to God. I encourage you to write your response to what you’ve learned through this study in your own words.

Chapter 1 The Sweetness of His Voice

“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Revelation 3:20

*“I have never been more fully aware of God’s presence and His voice
than during some of my times of bitterest sorrow and suffering.”¹*

Preparing to Listen

I love to use hymns in my personal devotions. A favorite of mine is “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart.” The hymn writer first asks God to “descend upon my heart”—to make His presence known. But then he asks God to “wean it from earth.” What a powerful and important request. How often “earth” interrupts times when I want to be hearing the voice of God. We too need God to “wean” us from earth—from all the distractions that would keep us from hearing His voice.

What things most easily distract you when you want to quiet your heart before God?

Prayerfully commit each of these things to the Lord. A quiet heart takes practice. Don’t be discouraged or give up when distractions come. Weaning doesn’t happen immediately. Allow time for your heart to become quiet and your mind to become focused on hearing God’s voice. It’s worth the wait.

Pondering God’s Word

God loves to talk to us. Even after sin destroyed the intimate talks God had with Adam and Eve, He continued to find ways for His voice to be heard. It was His voice that sustained me over and over again during times of suffering. It was my source of comfort, guidance, wisdom, and encouragement.

In the past God spoke through His prophets. According to Hebrews 1:1–2, how does God speak to us today?

¹ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 32

A friend of mine has a young daughter who is blind. A number of years ago, I stopped to talk to someone close to where Britni was playing. Immediately she yelled out, “Hi, Aunt Esther.” She couldn’t see me, but she knew my voice.

What does John 10:1–5 teach us about learning to recognize the voice of God?

Why was it important for sheep to know their shepherd’s voice?

Why is it important for us?

Read pages 30–31: “Listening with Expectation.” How is Habakkuk a role model for us in listening for God’s voice?

Pausing to Reflect

Read Isaiah 48:17. Why is it so important to hear God’s voice during our times of suffering?

Often our own thoughts are confused during times of suffering. Our own “wisdom” is overshadowed by our emotions and our pain.

What was God’s promise to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 33:3?

What was the context of these words?

God is never silent in our suffering. He will always find a way to speak to us if we’ll quiet our hearts to listen.

Give an example of a time when you heard God’s voice during a difficult time.

Praying in Response

God is not a silent God. He loves to speak if we'll take the time to listen. We especially need to hear His voice in our times of suffering. Confess to God your desire to hear His voice. Pray that you'll learn to recognize His voice and be sensitive to His every whisper.

Chapter 2

The Sweetness of Knowing God

“I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord.”
Jeremiah 24:7

“In the brightness of good times we often miss some of the most wonderful and intimate details of God, but against the blackness of suffering we see pinpoints of light that we never noticed before.”²

Preparing to Listen

Knowing someone always involves listening to that person. It’s no different with God. If we want to know God, we need to take the time to hear what He has to say.

Exodus 33:11 says that the Lord spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” My guess is that Moses gave God His full attention. Read Exodus 33:7–11 and see if you can find some keys for Moses’ close relationship with God. List them below.

Ask God to help you to “come outside the camp”—mentally leaving behind the distractions and responsibilities that hinder you from hearing His voice. Make this place where you are right now your “tent of meeting” where you are ready to hear from God.

Pondering God’s Word

You can’t read very far into Scripture before finding an amazing truth. God desires to be known. The Almighty, Holy, Creator God wants us to know Him in a deep and personal way. How is this made clear in John 17:3?

Read Job 42:1–5. How was Job’s life impacted by seeing God rather than just hearing of Him?

According to 2 Peter 1:2–3, what are the benefits of knowing God?

² *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 34

How important are these to our times of suffering?

Read Lamentations 3:1–20. Briefly describe Jeremiah’s circumstances.

Now read verse 21 and see the significance of the “yet” that is based on Jeremiah’s knowledge of God. What specifically did he recall about God’s character that brought him hope and encouragement?

Pausing to Reflect

Times of suffering are often very dark times in our lives. Read pages 33–34. What is the advantage of darkness?

What are some characteristics of God we find clearly illuminated during our times of suffering?

We often don’t understand why God allows suffering. What do you know about God’s nature that helps you when you don’t understand His ways?

Unanswered questions can lead to bitterness and resentment toward God, or they can bring us to our knees in worship. How does Isaiah 55:8–9 help us choose worship over bitterness?

Praying in Response

There really are two aspects to this chapter on “The Sweetness of Knowing God.” Suffering offers us a unique opportunity to learn more about God, to “see” Him rather than just hear about Him. But suffering is also a time when remembering what we do know about God can sustain us and give us hope when we don’t have answers.

Take a few minutes to praise God for what you do know about Him, for those characteristics that enable you to go forward during difficult times. But I also urge you to humbly ask God to reveal Himself to you in a new and deeper way—to use the darkness of suffering to illuminate His glorious nature to your heart.

Chapter 3 The Sweetness of His Care

“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:19

*“Our neediness provides an opportunity to learn to know our God better
and to see Him revealed in our own circumstances in practical and specific ways.”³*

Preparing to Listen

My dad was a great storyteller and had his own built-in audience of seven children. His stories usually ended with a great deal of laughter. Stories are a wonderful way of communicating and can brighten our day with humor, make an important point, keep us informed, or simply entertain. This chapter is made up of a lot of stories—stories that are intentional in revealing the faithfulness and care of a loving heavenly Father. I pray that God will use these to encourage your heart and strengthen your faith.

I loved to listen to my dad, not just because he was a good storyteller but also because I knew his heart toward me. Read 1 Peter 5:7. What assurance do we find that encourages us to listen to our heavenly Father as He speaks?

Pondering God’s Word

There are so many verses that assure us we can trust God to meet our needs, whatever they may be, but there are also wonderful examples of real-life people with real-life needs. God has not put their stories in His Word to entertain us but to encourage and instruct us.

Read Romans 4:18–21. Remember, Abraham was old when the promise of a son was given to him. Years went by and there was still no apparent sign of the promise being fulfilled. Abraham had to trust God to not only keep His word, but to do the impossible.

What were the “facts” Abraham was facing?

³ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 48

What did Abraham see as greater than those facts?

List the four things in verses 20–21 that indicate Abraham’s response.

Personalize these verses that assure us of God’s provision:

2 Peter 1:3

Matthew 6:31–33

Read of Jeremiah’s confidence expressed in Jeremiah 32:17. Why do you think he addressed God as he did?

Pausing to Reflect

Faith does not ignore facts! List some “facts” you are facing that seem hopeless, or even impossible.

Read the following verses and find a truth in each that is greater than your “facts.”

Psalm 32:10

Psalm 33:18–22

Psalm 71:19–21

Jeremiah 33:25–26

Hebrews 4:15–16

I trust these absolutes about God will help you to be able to respond like Abraham. Don't forget: Abraham's facts were true, but so were the promises of God.

God is often referred to as "all-sufficient." Look up *sufficient* in the dictionary and write down the definition.

List some of your needs, and simply write the word *sufficient* beside each one.

Remember: "It is our needs that draw us to the all-sufficient One and allow us to experience firsthand the sweetness of His personal and loving care."⁴ Don't be afraid to be needy.

Praying in Response

I encourage you to set aside some uninterrupted time to bring your needs to God. Present them to Him with the assurance that He is truly sufficient. You will never have a need that is too great for God to handle. Romans 4:20 says that Abraham was "strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God." I trust that as you've studied this chapter and Scripture, your faith has been strengthened and you can join Abraham in giving glory to the all-sufficient God.

⁴ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 60

Chapter 4

The Sweetness of Surrender

“It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.”

Psalm 18:32

*“To surrender is to trust the One whose way is perfect
and who alone can make our way perfect, even in suffering.”⁵*

Preparing to Listen

When I’m asked to sign a copy of *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, I often write, “May God add His voice to these words.” That’s more than just a nice sentiment. That’s my sincere prayer for everyone who reads this book. I know that my own words don’t have the power to make a difference, and so I earnestly pray for God’s voice to be heard—for Him to speak personally to the hearts of my readers.

I believe this may be the most important chapter of this book, and so I earnestly pray that God will add His voice as you study “The Sweetness of Surrender.” Jesus assures us in John 14:26 that His Spirit will teach us. Listen for His voice as you read and study these words.

Based on Isaiah 55:8–11, why is it so important to hear what God has to say?

What assurance do we have in verse 11?

Pondering God’s Word

Joseph was a victim of suffering at the hands of his own brothers. Read the following verses. How do they indicate that Joseph was able to surrender to God’s purpose in His suffering? (Also read pages 68–69 in the book.)

Genesis 41:50–52

⁵ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 71

Genesis 45:5–8; 50:20

Read these biblical examples and describe the suffering involved and the outcome of each person's surrender.

Daniel 3:16–30

Luke 1:26–38 (consider the culture of that day)

Matthew 26:36–42 (obviously the most powerful example of surrender)

Take a few minutes to meditate on the personal significance of Jesus' surrender. His surrender was more than just a good example. He surrendered to suffering beyond imagination, prompted by love beyond understanding, to enable us to share in glory beyond description. "Amazing love, how can it be?"⁶

Pausing to Reflect

What three choices do we have during times of suffering? (p. 63).

1.

2.

3.

⁶ "And Can It Be?"

List some times of suffering (past or present) and write the number from the preceding question that best indicates your response.

What helps us choose surrender is an understanding of the heart of God. Read pages 17–18 in the Introduction. How does this illustration help us to understand the heart of God?

Praying in Response

This prayer response may take some time. You may find your heart resistant to the idea of surrender, especially if you're in the midst of suffering. Remember the story of David in 2 Samuel 15. He wasn't surrendering to his son's evil intentions, but to God's purposes. Let God speak to your heart. It's my prayer that you will be able to end this study by joining David in saying: "Let him do to me whatever seems good to him" (2 Samuel 15:26).

Chapter 5 The Sweetness of Shared Suffering

“Jesus wept.”
John 11:35

*“Suffering is an investment in future glory, a glory that is beyond our ability to grasp.
And that glory will someday be as real as our suffering is today.”⁷*

Preparing to Listen

Years ago there was a game called the “Ungame.” The rule was that when a player chose a question, he could answer it without anyone else commenting or interrupting. No one was to speak or offer an opinion. The obvious point of the game was to learn to listen. It was harder than it sounds.

Sometimes quieting our hearts to hear from God is also harder than it sounds. God urges us to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10), but stillness is often easier said than done. Sometimes it takes a few minutes of stillness, but eventually our own thoughts will subside and, in that quietness, God will speak. Take time to become quiet before the Lord as you prepare to hear His voice.

How does knowing that God is God help bring stillness to your heart?

List some specific things about God that bring quietness to your heart as you wait to hear from Him.

Pondering God’s Word

One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is facing it alone. What encouragement do we get from the following verses?

⁷ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 79

Hebrews 13:5–6

Psalm 10:14, 17–18

Psalm 34:18

Revelation 7:17

Have you ever gone through a time of suffering when you couldn't sense God's presence? Read Job 23:1–10. What two things encouraged Job when he couldn't "find" God?

1.

2.

How do these truths encourage us when God seems distant?

Pausing to Reflect

Jesus shares our suffering.

How much does it help if someone understands what you're going through—someone who can "share" in your suffering? Take some time to meditate on what it means when Christ is referred to as "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3).

Paul gives us some very practical advice in Hebrews 12:1–3 to help us during our times of suffering. Suffering has a very selfish side and demands our full attention. How does Paul’s admonishment help us?

We share His sufferings.

I confess that I don’t fully understand all the implications of sharing in Christ’s sufferings, but I know Scripture makes clear that we have the awesome (though often painful) privilege of doing just that. Think about how this puts suffering in perspective and offers hope in the midst (Romans 8:17).

We are called to share in the sufferings of others.

“Scripture calls us to do this, but our own suffering equips us to do this” (p. 83).

Have you ever had an “efu” experience? (See p. 81.) If so, you know how much that can mean during a difficult time. Write down some ideas of how you can share in the sufferings of others.

Praying in Response

Take time to thank God for never leaving you alone during times of suffering. Thank Him for His Son who understands our suffering as no one else can. And then prayerfully consider who might need you to offer them an “efu.”

Chapter 6 The Sweetness of His Comfort

“For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.”
Isaiah 49:13

*“Include God in your grief. Find comfort in His guidance, His wisdom, and, above all, His presence surrounding you and drawing near to you in sorrow.”*⁸

Preparing to Listen

The hymn writer prayed, “Speak, Lord, in the stillness, while I wait on Thee. Hushed my heart to listen, in expectancy.”⁹ Sometimes we forget to “hush” our hearts so that we can hear the Lord speak. He doesn’t raise His voice to be heard over the din, but waits for us to quiet our thoughts and mind to hear Him. Quiet yourself before the Lord now. Allow your mind to become still (this may take a few minutes), and then ask Him to speak to you as you wait to hear His voice. It’s worth the wait!

Many times it’s not just our thoughts that need to be quieted, but our emotions as well. Grief, worry, or fears are all emotions that fight against a quiet, listening heart. Ask God to hush your heart from the din of emotions that would hinder you from hearing His voice.

Read Zephaniah 3:17. Write out these words in the first person as a reminder of God’s willingness to “hush” your heart to hear His voice.

Pondering God’s Word

We can’t be indifferent to someone who is in need of comfort. God certainly isn’t. Part of comfort is to identify with others’ grief. How do these verses display God’s willingness to do that with us?

Isaiah 63:9

⁸ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 97

⁹ “Speak, Lord, in the Stillness”

John 11:33–36

Sometimes we find it hard to find the right words to bring comfort. God has included so many “right words” in Scripture that help put our suffering in perspective and bring us comfort. What comfort do you find in the following verses?

2 Corinthians 4:16–18

Romans 8:28*

*Don’t let the familiarity of these words keep you from taking comfort from their truth! I heard someone refer to this as a Band-Aid we offer to people who are suffering. I disagree. I believe this is a solid rock to give us our footing when “all around [our] soul gives way.”¹⁰

Psalm 119:50 tells us that David’s source of comfort was the promises of God. Write down some of God’s promises that bring comfort to your heart during suffering or times of grief.

Personal Reflection

Comfort redefined:

Write the traditional definition of *comfort* (p. 90).

Write the author’s definition of *comfort* (p. 90).

What is the difference between these two definitions?

¹⁰ “The Solid Rock”

Suffering almost always includes grief, because suffering almost always includes loss. Give an example of a time when God enabled you to go on. It may have been someone's encouraging words, a verse of Scripture, or some practical help. It's good for us to remember the things that helped us take that next step forward.

Take time to consider if there is someone near you who may need your comfort—your help to enable them to move forward.

Praying in Response

I think comfort is wonderful proof of God's commitment to love and care for us. He is moved by our suffering. He shows compassion and care in our times of grief. If this has been your experience, take time to thank Him for His enabling. If you are in need of that comfort, share your heart with Him now and trust yourself to His unfailing love and care.

Chapter 7 The Sweetness of His Names

“Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.”

Psalm 34:3

“I love the wholeness of our God, who gave His Son each of those names so that together they would show us a picture of His glorious sufficiency.”¹¹

Preparing to Listen

My mind seems to become more active when my body becomes still. It never seems to fail that when I sit down to study or pray, I think of a hundred and one random things that range from what’s for dinner to where I put my phone. I often find myself quoting an old hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.”¹² That’s a good description of my mind when I want to be still and focus on the things of God. The hymn continues: “Here’s my heart, oh, take and seal it.” For me, it’s “here’s my mind, oh, take and silence it.” It takes a quiet heart to hear the voice of God. Take time to reign in those roaming thoughts and prepare to hear from God as we find comfort and assurance in His wonderful names.

Where does your mind frequently wander when you prepare to be still before the Lord?

How do God’s instructions in 2 Corinthians 10:5 help us to subdue an overactive mind when we are waiting to hear God speak?

Pondering God’s Word

In Exodus 3:14, God introduces Himself to Moses by name. And it is this name that gives validity to all the other names by which we know Him. A footnote in my Bible regarding “I AM” says that it can also be translated as, “I will be what I will be.” Think of the wonder of that truth. God will be what He will be. He cannot be bought or influenced, nor is He subject to moods.

¹¹ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 113

¹² “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

“I AM!” I often think that is one of the most wonderful fill-in-the-blanks ever: “I am the Alpha and Omega.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Every name that follows that great “I AM” has meaning and significance for us—especially during our times of suffering.

Fill in a name of God or Jesus that brings you hope and encouragement during difficult times. Tell briefly why this name is so important to you.

I AM _____

I AM _____

I AM _____

I AM _____

What does Philippians 2:9–10 tell us about the name of Jesus? How does that give us encouragement in our times of suffering?

Personal Reflections

In Psalm 9:10, the psalmist states that there is a connection between knowing God’s name(s) and trust. I believe there is a name of God that declares His sufficiency for every human need. Aren’t you glad that God doesn’t have just one name but has many names that share His heart and nature and display His provision for our particular needs?

List below some of the needs you are facing right now, and beside each one put a name of God that helps you to trust Him for that need.

Needs

Name

Praying in Response

It's hard to ponder the names of God and not respond in worship. Allow your mind to be filled with wonder at all that God is as He declares Himself to us through His many names.

Chapter 8 The Sweetness of His Grace

“You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”
2 Timothy 2:1

“Words are inadequate to fully express grace because grace is greater than any definition.”¹³

Preparing to Listen

Often we are so sure we know what someone is going to say that we don't really pay close attention when they speak. We can do the same with God. This is to our loss. God loves to speak to us personally. He doesn't have the same generic words for every heart. He meets us according to our needs, so it is worth quieting our hearts to hear Him.

Grace is one of those words that can put our mind in neutral. We know about grace, sing about grace, hear sermons on grace, and read devotionals about grace. But we can miss out on some of the heights and depths of God's grace by not giving Him our full attention as He speaks to us about His truly “amazing” grace.

A woman in our last church used to pray, “Lord, suit a blessing to their need.” Ask the Lord to suit His words to your needs as you study this chapter.

Read Psalm 85:8. The psalmist made a deliberate choice to listen to what God had to say. Write a prayer below expressing your choice to “listen to what God the Lord says.”

Pondering God's Word

The following verses help us to understand grace. I have often found that looking up a familiar word adds a depth of understanding. Look up the words suggested below and replace each with word(s) from an appropriate definition.

Example: Ephesians 2:6–7, “God raised us up with Christ . . . [that] he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.”

¹³ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 117

Definition of *incomparable*: “having no equal; eminent beyond comparison”¹⁴ We can now express Ephesians 2:7 like this: God raised us up with Christ [that] he might show us the unequaled riches of his grace that are beyond comparison.

1. 2 Corinthians 9:8—look up the word *abound* and rewrite the verse.
2. 2 Corinthians 12:9—look up *sufficient* and rewrite the verse.
3. Ephesians 1:7–8—look up *lavish* and rewrite the verse.

How does Hebrews 4:16 describe God’s throne?

How does that encourage you as you come to Him during times of need and suffering?

Personal Reflection

It is clear in the verses we just looked at that God is not stingy or miserly with grace. He has it in abundance, and He gives it freely and in abundance. Second Peter assures us that God has everything we need for a godly life (1:3).

What are your needs right now? Are you facing fear, discouragement, or defeat? List those things and then beside each one list one of God’s riches available to you as His child. If possible, include a verse.

¹⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary (online)

“You are God’s temple” is not just an expression but also a reality. He dwells in you and has an abundance of His riches (grace!) stored in the treasury of your heart for your use. Truly “amazing grace”!

Praying in Response

It’s almost impossible to think about grace without responding in love and thankfulness. It’s all there—truly *all* we need for life and godliness. Ask God to help you to draw from that supply and to experience the abundant grace for your life that He loves to lavishly bestow!

Chapter 9

The Sweetness of His Correction

“Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.”
Job 5:17

*“The sweetness is not found in the correction; it is found
in the love that prompts it and the results that justify it.”¹⁵*

Preparing to Listen

An amazing truth is found in Psalm 25:14 and echoed in Proverbs 3:32. Take a few minutes to read these verses and meditate on this thought: If God is willing to “confide” in us—to share His thoughts and His heart—we need to take the time to listen so that we don’t miss a thing He wants to say to us. His voice is always personal.

Correction is a subject where opinions vary, so it is important to quiet our hearts and allow God to speak. We are so blessed to have God’s own Spirit to help us to understand His heart and His motive in our suffering.

Read John 9:1–3 and Hebrews 12:1–11. What are some possible reasons for suffering?

Are you willing to listen to what God wants to reveal about His correction? It’s so important that we don’t just listen to the voices around us. We will end up confused and uncertain. God alone can explain His own heart . . . and reveal yours. Quiet yourself so that the Almighty God can “confide” in you.

Pondering God’s Word

This chapter deals with a subject that is very controversial in our day. There are very strong opinions about if and how children should be disciplined. However, Scripture doesn’t have that same struggle. It makes it clear that discipline, or correction, goes hand-in-hand with love. I think it’s important to say again that I don’t believe *all* suffering is God’s discipline or

¹⁵ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 128

punishment. But it is certainly important to open our hearts to that possibility and to earnestly seek what God has to say to us.

What do Jeremiah 17:9 and Proverbs 16:2 teach us about ourselves?

In light of that, why are Psalms 26:2 and 139:23 so important?

What do the following verses teach us about God's use of correction?

Proverbs 15:5

Proverbs 29:15

Hebrews 12:10

According to Hebrews 12:10–11, what are the results of God's correction?

Pausing to Reflect

Suffering is a time when we often feel that God has deserted us or is ignoring us. According to Hebrews 12:7–8 and Proverbs 13:24, what does being disciplined say about your relationship to God?

“Discipline has a purpose.”¹⁶ Read Ephesians 1:4. Write down your thoughts about God’s desire for each of us. Does this realization give a sense of purpose to your times of suffering? Explain.

The refiner’s fire is a vivid picture of God’s purpose in some of our painful times. Reflect on the significance of that process. Read Job 23:10. What was Job’s hope in his suffering? How does this put suffering in perspective?

Whether your suffering is God’s correction or not, it is always a time when we can learn more about God and about ourselves. Hebrews 12:11 states that no discipline seems enjoyable at the time that it’s happening. I think we would all readily agree with that. We would much rather avoid it. But remember the love that prompts it and the hope of coming through as pure gold.

Praying in Response

This is a time to become honest before God, or rather to allow God to speak honestly to your heart. We don’t like correction, but we do love knowing that it is prompted by the heart of our faithful and loving Father. Often suffering is not because of sin in our life, but our response to our suffering can often be wrong. Ask God to search your heart—to examine your heart and mind. His motive is always restoration, because you’re His and He loves you!

¹⁶ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 128

Chapter 10 The Sweetness of Hope

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”
Hebrews 6:19

“Hope is not crossed fingers, but a settled heart.”¹⁷

Preparing to Listen

There is probably nothing that impacts our times of suffering more than hope—or the lack of it. No matter what we face, God offers us hope—not just a cross-your-fingers kind of hope but real, solid hope that has its basis in God and His promises. Listen to His voice. Be ready to hear His words that offer hope no matter what the circumstances. It is His voice and His words alone that offer us our greatest need in times of suffering: hope.

God’s voice offered hope to the nation of Israel over and over again. One of my favorite passages about God’s willingness to speak words of hope to us is found in Hosea 2:14–15.

What was God’s assurance to Israel about their “Valley of Achor” (trouble)?

Do you have a “Valley of Achor”? Quiet your heart now to hear God speak tenderly to you His words of hope.

Pondering God’s Word

Read the following Scriptures. Give a brief summary of the difficulty, and then give specific reasons for hope.

2 Chronicles 20:11–17

¹⁷ *The Sweet Side of Suffering*, p. 138

Daniel 2:10–11, 26–28

2 Corinthians 4:16–18

Read Isaiah 49:23 and Romans 5:5. What assurance do these verses give us?

There are few who have suffered like Job. In fact, his name is synonymous with suffering. Yet even in Job's honest anguish we find glimmers of hope. Read Job 19:25–27 and write down Job's greatest declaration of hope.

Pausing to Reflect

List some situations in your life (past or present) that have felt utterly hopeless.

Hopelessness is a terrible emotion that can cause utter despair. What happened to Marcelo when he felt their situation was hopeless? (p. 139). What has been your response to seemingly hopeless situations?

How do the words "but there is a God in heaven" (Daniel 2:28) offer hope?

What do the words "hope is an emotional investment in our future" mean to you? (p. 145).

In 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, what are we encouraged to do that will bring us hope?

Praying in Response

God gives us an amazing assurance in Isaiah 49:23 that if we hope in Him we “will not be disappointed.” God declared that to the nation of Israel centuries ago, but it is still true for us today because God remains the same. One of the most hopeful things we know about God is that He is immutable—unchanging. There is a hymn that declares, “All may change, but Jesus never.”¹⁸ Sometimes as we face times of suffering, all does change. Our hope is in a God who doesn’t. Our hope is in a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever and who keeps His word.

What better way to end this study than to place your hope firmly in God with the confidence that you won’t be disappointed! Praise Him for the assurance that no matter what you face, there is hope because there is God.

¹⁸ “Yesterday, Today, Forever”