

HOPE

for the Hurting

TONY EVANS

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CHAPTER 1

Coming to the Comforter

Life can be painful.
Life hurts.

Life can come with unique challenges, difficulties, bumps, and bruises that leave you lost and drowning in their wake.

It could be a financial disaster. It could come by way of a health issue. Relationships sometimes turn sour. Careers can feel more like doing time than living your life. You might lose a loved one, or two, or three, or more due to sickness or accidents.

Life does hurt. And Jesus knew it would. He said, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33 ESV). He didn’t say “you might” have troubles and difficulties. Jesus said you, and I, *will* have pain, hurt, and struggles.

Sin has made its mark on society in such a dominant way that its repercussions and reverberations are felt everywhere. Some are experienced because they have been caused by us. Others because someone else has committed sins against us. Other pain we experience may simply be due to atmospheric sin that leaves an impact on all those within it. No matter the exact cause, all of sin’s effects in this world bring pain.

Like Christmas presents under a tree, life’s pain also comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. But unlike those gifts, you don’t really want to open them. And you never know what is inside until you do. What’s more, one box can often create a domino effect to more of life’s pain—ushering in a Pandora’s box of problems to face.

I understand firsthand what this type of compounded pain feels like. I know what it is to face one tragedy after another until you begin to dread the next

day, simply because you don't know the bad news it may bring.

In a span of less than two years, I lost my brother, my only sister, my sister's husband, two of my nieces, my father, and my wife—all to health issues of one kind or another. At the same time, both of my daughters received cancer diagnoses and had growing health concerns—which were thankfully treated, and they have since recovered from them.

As you can see, I don't speak from a theological position of platitudes on pain. I am writing to you from my heart.

When I talk to you about pain, I'm not telling you solely what is on my mind or what I have studied on the subject. I am telling you what works and what doesn't, addressing it from my experiences. To face life's difficulties with dignity and come out on the other side with grace is one of our greatest challenges we are given on earth.

As a counselor who has counseled thousands of people in pain, I know that some of us face it well. I also know that others succumb to its crushing weight, which only leads to more pain through the compounding consequences of additional poor personal choices.

In this book, I want to give you some spiritual principles to help you face pain and hurt well. There is love and happiness on the other side of it all, if you will learn how to walk through the hurt with both peace and joy.

To face life's difficulties with dignity and come out on the other side with grace is one of our greatest challenges we are given on earth.

One man showed us how to do this. His name is Paul. He gave us more than spiritual serendipities celebrating God in the good times. He gave us a strategy for surviving and, even more, for thriving in the midst of life's pain. He didn't just give us a hope for tomorrow but also a delight for

today. He showed us the importance of not checking out through distractions or numbing ourselves by self-medicating, but rather how to maximize the moments of life's pain for the purposes God has in mind.

The promise of God's Word has never been a guarantee *from* pain and trouble. It has always been

a promise to be experienced *in* the hurt itself. God does manifest His victory on our behalf oftentimes by removing the challenge or bringing us through it, but not until He has developed us in it. God will allow us to remain in pain until we are ready to be delivered from it in order that we might learn, grow, and strengthen our spiritual level of maturity.

The great danger in this spiritual adventure called life is that while you and I are passing through the wilderness, we may want to go back to Egypt, like the Israelites who sought to return to slavery rather than face the hardships at hand. Or another danger comes in the desire to loiter in the wilderness and become unproductive. That is often a result of feeling stuck or not knowing where you are going. You may wind up doing nothing in living out your destiny because you are so discouraged by what you are facing and have no energy left to commit to your calling.

Both of these responses to the wilderness of life reflect what most people do. They either long to return to the known trials of the past, or they become ineffective and stagnant in all things spiritual. But God has a greater plan for the pain in your life. He has a purpose in mind.

As a pastor, I wish I could in good faith and in good conscience tell you that if you come to Jesus, it won't rain. You won't have pain. Nothing will hurt and life will be a cakewalk. I wish I could tell you that if you have faith in God and choose to obey Him, serve Him, and love Him, you will have no troubles. I wish I could promise you a life free from difficulty or financial trials. I wish I could say we live in a world of no

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plan for the pain in
your life.



abuse, no marital discord, no lingering in extended time waiting for a mate who never seems to show up. I wish I could assure you that your life will be free from crises, health issues, and disappointments.

It would make my job a lot easier as a pastor if I could tell you those things. But it would also make me a liar. Because those things are simply not true. They have never been true, and they never will be true.

My role as a spiritual leader in a world rife with pain is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The reason I must do this is because only the Truth will set you free (John 8:32).

Coming to the Comforter

The apostle Paul took his commitment to telling the truth seriously too. That's why we read in his own words a pretty stark summation of his life, showing how God has cared for him amidst a mass of suffering, as found in 2 Corinthians 1. Some highlights include:

“[God] comforts us in all our affliction” (v. 4).

“The sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance”
(v. 5).

“In the patient enduring of the same sufferings
which we also suffer” (v. 6).

“You are sharers of our sufferings” (v. 7).

“We were burdened excessively, beyond our
strength, so that we despaired even of life”
(v. 8).

“We had the sentence of death within ourselves”
(v. 9).

“[God] delivered us from so great a peril of
death” (v. 10).

Reading what he's written, you might get the impression that Paul is in a painful situation. Not only

that, he's with others whom he cares about who are in painful situations as well.

Have you ever experienced a time when witnessing the pain a loved one felt was deeper than your own pain? When we see our loved ones in pain and we are helpless to remove that pain or relieve them of the burden they are experiencing, it can hurt our hearts just as deeply, if not more so, than painful experiences we have ourselves.

Paul was in pain. His heart hurt. His friends' hearts hurt too. So much so, that he even spoke of wanting to die.

In contemporary language, that would be classified as severe depression. There's no way to sugarcoat someone writing that they "despaired even of life." And yet, what I find interesting in all of this is that Paul is also probably the most mature Christian who has ever lived. He stands head and shoulders above most others when it comes to boldly declaring the faith, representing Jesus, and suffering for His cause. His own descriptions of everything he went through and endured as a follower of Christ are daunting. It's difficult to conceive that one man can go through so much, but Paul did.

Coming to the Comforter

The reason I'm pointing this fact out as we start our journey together is because I want to remind all of us whose hearts may hurt that we are not talking about a bad man in pain when we reference Paul and learn from him. We are looking at a good man hurting. A godly man hurting. Even a man hurting as a result of the things he was doing to advance God's kingdom in the world!

See, a lot of believers think that if they follow Jesus, serve Him, and love Him, they are not supposed to hurt. They point fingers at God when something goes wrong. But God never promised any of us a rose garden life or a stroll-through-the-park existence. Nor is every trial we face a personal indictment on our faith.

This world comes with trouble. It just does. The sooner we can accept that reality and stop ourselves from trying to spiritualize every painful situation, loss, or difficulty we encounter, we will be better positioned to weather it well.

People get sick on this planet. People die. People get abused. Go hungry. Lose relationships. Accidents happen. Careers go south. Loneliness lingers. As I referenced earlier, Jesus reminded us that this world

comes with troubles and tribulations (John 16:33). But the difference for kingdom followers comes in knowing that because Jesus is in us, we can overcome the onslaught of hurtful scenarios we face.

Other biblical characters understood and wrote about hurtful seasons as well. Probably the most well-known is Job. During his darkest days, he said that he did not sense God's presence. Even though he was known as a righteous man, he felt alone, lost, and in pain. In Job 23 we read: "Behold, I go forward but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He acts on the left, I cannot behold Him; He turns on the right, I cannot see Him" (vv. 8–9).

Don't be fooled. Life does hurt. There are different levels at different times for different people, but

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suffering is something we all share. We all cry. No matter how much we love Jesus, we all find ourselves in times of tears and sorrow, even periods of depression. But like Paul, who had even reached what many

Coming to the Comforter

would term a suicidal level of depression, having “despaired of life itself,” we can discover how to dignify our difficulties through one key decision: *focusing on God*. It is in God where we will find the comfort we need. Paul reminds us of this time and again in the same chapter, 2 Corinthians 1, where he outlines his pains and struggles. We read:

“God of all comfort” (v. 3).

“Who comforts us in all our affliction” (v. 4).

“We ourselves are comforted by God” (v. 4).

“Our comfort is abundant through Christ” (v. 5).

“If we are comforted, it is for your comfort”
(v. 6).

“You are sharers of our comfort” (v. 7).

Comfort.

God comforts those who need it most.

Many of us have comforters on our beds in our homes. These are thicker blankets designed to provide an extra layer of warmth when needed. The comforter you may have on your bed does not, in and of itself,

change the weather. Instead, it changes the effect of the weather on you. It is called a comforter because, if you wrap yourself in it, the cool air that surrounds you no longer has the final say-so on how you feel. Not because the cool air has changed or gotten warmer. If it's chilly in your room, then it's still chilly. But you are now warm because of the warmth of the comforter around or over you.

The Greek word for “comforter” used in the verses we just looked at is the word *paraclete*. It is the same root term used about the Holy Spirit when Jesus said God will send us someone to “help” us in John 14:16: “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever.”

Thus, in every affliction, trouble, hurt, pain, distress, or difficulty of life that you may be facing, there is a comforter on the bed. There is a blanket of blessing if you will choose to grab it.

Now, it's possible to spend so much time in a cold room complaining about the cold, all the while not choosing to pull the comforter up over you. It's not because the comforter isn't there; it's because your focus is on the temperature in the room.

Where you choose to focus will affect what you get to experience. If you can only be happy when there are no problems and issues at hand, then your misplaced focus will never allow you to be truly happy. As 1 Corinthians 10:13 states: “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” The operative word we often bypass in that verse is *with*. God will provide the way of escape “with” the temptation you face. It doesn’t say God will block all temptations from your life. Nor will He block all the challenging situations you face. But He will give you the ability to have joy *with* those challenges.

As we all know, pain and difficulties can be temptations. They exist as temptations to give up, blame God, complain, gripe, blame others, and more. God never promised us a life without temptation or grief. What He did promise is that in the midst of the affliction and hurt, He will give us comfort.

When my kids were younger, my wife, Lois, and I would sometimes take them to the amusement park. They loved the roller coasters and other rides.

The problem with these rides is that other people loved them too. So we would always have to wait in a long line, usually in the Texas heat, in order to ride for a minute or two. Every so often there might be a sign that let us know how much longer our wait time would be.

Eventually, though, the amusement park management got clever. They began to put digital screens up along the way so that as everyone would wait in line, there would be some form of entertainment along the way. On the screens would be various short shows, songs, or glimpses at other rides. They didn't change the wait time—it was still a challenging part of the journey itself. You were still waiting ninety minutes or more to get on the ride. But what they did change was the nature of the wait. Now there was something for you to focus on that took your mind off the pain of having to stand there for so long.

I don't know how long God is going to keep you in the line you are in. I don't know how long He is going to make you wait for your deliverance to come. I can't guarantee you that your problem is going to be solved tomorrow, next month, or even next year. You can pray toward that end, trust toward that end, and

desire toward that end, but you and I both know that neither of us can create that end on our own.

So I'm not going to spend my time and yours in this book making false promises to you that if you trust Jesus, Monday is going to be better. For all I know, Monday may even be worse. But what I will tell you is that while you are waiting for the pain to subside and the hurt to heal, there is a Comforter given to you by God. God has offered you a new focus of His own divinity to take your focus off your own feet standing still for so long. There is something God has provided you while you are in this line called life, and it is designed to equip and enable you to deal with all you are facing right now.

If you will choose to look to God in the midst of your affliction by giving a theological focus to the troubles you face, you will give dignity to your difficulty and provide purpose to your pain. God isn't asking you to like the hurt you are feeling; He is asking you to accept that it has a greater meaning and intention in His hands. God does not give you pain just for pain's sake.

Here's a very simple principle to apply as you walk through the ups and downs of life: the worse the pain

gets, the deeper your focus on the Lord ought to be. You can do this when you rest in the overarching reality of the sovereignty of God.

The sovereignty of God means that nothing happens to you unless it passes through God's fingers first. God is in control. Either God has caused what has happened to you, or He has allowed it. If He caused it, He has a reason for it. If He has allowed it, you also need to trust the truth that His allowance has a cause in and of itself, as stated in Romans 8:28, "And we

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know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." The core of God's purpose is to

increase and expedite our conformity to the image of Christ (v. 29). Making us more like Jesus is God's ultimate purpose for every believer. Everything that happens is supernaturally designed with the overarching goal of enhancing our spiritual development.

Never underestimate the sovereignty of God. If something reached you, it passed through Him first. Therefore, if it passed through Him by Him allowing it to reach you, He let it get to you for a reason. It's never aimless, random, a result of bad luck or chance. None of those words ought to be part of a serious Christian's vocabulary. Those are empty, meaningless terms when a sovereign God controls all things.

Like the three Hebrew boys left in the fiery furnace, God doesn't always deliver you out of difficulty. Sometimes He chooses to join you in it (Dan. 3:25). The fire stayed hot. But the effect of the fire no longer had a damaging impact on the three young men because God had entered the equation.

If God has not taken you out of whatever it is you are facing right now, know that He wants to join you in it. Let Him in. Let Him come near. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you in the middle of what you are going through. He has the power to limit the damaging effects of whatever it is you are facing or dealing with right now.

Knocked Down but Not Knocked Out

Things may not change entirely when you draw near to God in the middle of painful situations, but the way you experience them will change. We see how this comes about in 2 Corinthians 4:6–11 where Paul explains it more fully. It says:

For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Coming to the Comforter

Paul points out to you and me in this passage that even when circumstances may knock us down, they shouldn't knock us out. When you are going through the affliction, that is the time to run to God like never before. God must be free to work in you before He can work for you.

Too often our prayers go something like this: "God, please work for me by changing my situation." All the while, God smiles and responds like a caring parent: "I hear you and I understand your request. But I can't work for you until you let me work in you. I'm trying to develop something in you so that what I am doing will show up and produce the desired result."

Any woman who has given birth understands there can be a great purpose to pain. The hurt can be extreme. What's more, it can last for hours. But in the pain, hurt, and difficulties of labor, there is often someone to give comfort. It might be some cool water or a kind word. It could be a piece of ice or a gentle massage. Someone is there who loves you and will offer comfort to you in order to help you get through the pain of giving birth.

In our spiritual lives we also give birth. We give birth to maturity, new dreams, victory over sin, vision,

love, and Christlike purpose through the pain we experience. As a kingdom follower you have to understand that something unique occurs through the trials of life that could never occur in the times of great blessing. Growth happens in the midst of grit and grind.

What you need to do in the middle of it all is remember that God knows right where you are and sees what you are going through. He wants to birth something in you and through you that will reveal Christ at an even greater level than before. Yet without

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and grind.



a focus on Jesus Christ, the pain is only painful, not purposeful.

Seek His comfort, not just the exit. His comfort is there for you right now.

But how can you get even more comfort than you have experienced up to this point? Paul tells us in one of the passages we looked at earlier. Let's examine it more closely because it is critical. He writes: "[God] comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by

God” (2 Cor. 1:4). The bottom-line principle is this: God comforts you so that you can become a comforter of someone else.

In the midst of your pain, you need to look for someone else to comfort as well. God reveals to us in this passage that He comforts us so that we might comfort others. So, while you are needing comfort yourself, you also need to look at how your greater understanding of pain, hurt, and difficulties has increased your compassion for others, especially those who are suffering in a similar situation to your own.

Now, I understand firsthand that one of the hardest things to do when you are hurting is to think of someone else. This is because you are dealing with your own pain.

One of our church members told me about a funeral that was held for her mother not too long ago. An interesting thing stood out to her during the planning and the funeral itself. She said that every time they met with her mother’s pastor at the church she had attended and who would be conducting the funeral, he would ask her and her family members to pray for him. He would even go on to give some specific things to pray about. This happened every time,

even if they just spoke in passing. This pastor would always end the conversation by asking them to pray for him.

At first, she said she just brushed this off as a formality. Then she started to wonder if anyone could truly be that selfish. But later, when it happened enough times, she started to ponder why he would be asking this of them so regularly, knowing they were overwhelmed with personal grief and trauma.


It dawned on her that he was trying to remind them to focus on someone else. Just like 2 Corinthians 1:4 says, we are given comfort in order to comfort others. This pastor had given many words of comfort and many prayers of comfort throughout the planning of the funeral and the actual funeral itself. He hadn't been dismissive of their pain at all. His prayer request was simply a gentle reminder to let comfort flow through them rather than to bottle it up and become stagnant and self-absorbed.

One of the fastest paths to healing from your hurt is to help someone else even while you are still hurting. This seasoned and wise pastor understood this spiritual truth and was seeking to help her and her family heal. Thinking about someone else is one of

the hardest things to do when you are hurting, but it is one of the best things to do when you are hurting. Why? Because the comfort you give is the comfort you will receive. That's why it is always "more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Similar to food, emotions must also pass through you for you to be healthy. If you choose to live as a cul-de-sac Christian, you'll wind up a very constipated Christian! If all you think about is what comes *to* you but not about what can flow *through* you, you will make yourself sick.

The comfort you give
is the comfort you
will receive.



God has designed each of us to provide comfort to others as we

also look to be comforted ourselves. In fact, He will often allow our pain in order that we might develop a deeper level of compassion and empathy for those who are also experiencing pain themselves.

As we walk through this topic together in these brief pages, you're going to learn how God has a special lane for comforters. It's similar to the HOV lane on a crowded highway. If you choose to travel alone,

you'll be stuck in the misery of the mess of bumper-to-bumper cars. But if you pair up with someone else who also needs to get where you are going—to a place of healing and hope—you will enter the HOV lane and travel more quickly and smoothly.


I have some boxes in my garage where some people sent me gifts this past Christmas. The boxes had cushioning material in them so the contents inside wouldn't get all shaken up and broken. Thus, as the box was tossed around and thrown around, being transported from station to station on train or truck, the gifts inside remained protected. Now, the foam didn't stop the boxes or the gifts inside from being bounced around. It just stopped them from being jacked up, having been bounced around. It prevented them from getting busted or broken.

Now, if you are anything like me and like to save your money rather than waste it, you'll have those boxes with that foam stacked somewhere in the garage. The reason is because when it comes time for me to mail something, I can reuse both the box and the foam. I can take the comforter around the gift that was sent to me, and I can use it to protect what I send to someone else. In this way, whatever I send will also

be able to handle the jerking and shifting that come its way.

This is what Paul is trying to tell us. He's trying to show us that God comforts us during periods of difficulties and disasters so that we can then use that same comfort to instill hope and healing in others. A perfect example of this is given to us in 2 Corinthians 7:5-7 where Paul pens: "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more."

The primary way
God comforts
people is through
people.



The primary way God comforts people is through people. God calls upon those who can feel, see, and understand to supply His comfort to others. He uses those who can identify with the pain others are

experiencing so that the comfort they give them is authentic and real.

Let me put it in plain, everyday language for you: you cannot expect to experience God like you want to without also ministering to others.

If you attend Worship Selfish at church rather than Worship Service, your experience of God will be self-limiting.

If your Christian faith is only about how you can be blessed or comforted, your experience of God will be constricted.

If you only care about getting out of your painful circumstance as fast as possible and not helping others in the midst of their painful circumstances, your experience of God will be short-circuited.

One of the great truths of Scripture is that God must first remove our self-reliance, self-focus, and self-sufficiency before He can lift us to the position of our destiny. We often call this *brokenness*, where we no longer depend upon ourselves because we can no longer depend upon ourselves. In other words, you are broken when your options have run out, there's nothing left to do, you don't know where to go, and you don't have a contact who can help you. Even your

money can't buy your way out. Your energy is spent, and you are just flat-out done.

This may sound like a bad place to be. But the moment you know you are done is the moment when you have reached the perfect position to experience your life's purpose. Because it is then, and only then, that God is able to get the glory and credit He is due. God will sometimes allow us to reach the point of emotional and experiential death in our lives so that we will no longer trust ourselves, but rather we will trust in the One who is able to raise the dead.

That's why personal peace and hope always start with the praise and honor of God. In the midst of whatever you are facing right now—whatever it is that drew you to this book or caused you to pick it up and read it—I want you to choose to praise God.

Choose to worship God.

Choose to trust God.

Choose to believe that God is able to take your mess and make a miracle.

He is able to take your lemons and turn them into sweet lemonade. God is able to take your bitter and make it better. He can turn your dreary yesterdays into brighter tomorrows. *But you have to let Him.* You have

to allow Him into the mire and muck of your pain, hurt, and sorrow so that He can show you the way out. He's not going to rescue you out of every painful scenario. But He has shown you how, by your own choices and ministry to others according to His will, you can be lifted up and discover the hope and comfort for which you long.

LIFE IS *painful.*

Everyone's story comes with unique challenges, difficulties, bumps, and bruises that leave you lost and drowning in their wake. It could be a financial disaster, a health issue, a broken relationship, or the loss of a loved one.

Dr. Tony Evans, bestselling author and pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, understands life's hardships firsthand. In a span of less than two years, he lost his brother, sister, brother-in-law, two nieces, father, and wife. At the same time, both of his daughters received cancer diagnoses. **In the wake of all this pain, Dr. Evans had to put into practice, at the deepest levels, the truths he has preached about God for more than forty years.**

God's Word doesn't promise us a life free from pain and trouble. It promises us something else—Someone else. Someone who will walk with us through all of life's trials and troubles.

There is hope for the hurting: HIS NAME IS JESUS.

TONY EVANS is one of the country's most respected leaders in evangelical circles. As a pastor, teacher, author, and speaker, he serves the body of Christ through his unique ability to communicate complex theological truths through simple yet profound illustrations. While addressing the practical issues of today, Dr. Evans is known as a relevant expositor. New and veteran pastors alike regard him as a pastor of pastors and a father in the faith.

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