

“Theologically rich. Profoundly God-centered. Unflinchingly honest. *Joy in the Sorrow* is a deeply moving account of how unexpected suffering undergirded by faith in Christ leads to joy and hope. I will carry these people, their stories, and their extraordinary joy with me for a long time; they have changed me. Buy this book, read it, and give it to those you love who are suffering.”

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*The Scars That Have Shaped Me*

“An incredible, personal, insightful journey led by one of my favorite teachers, Matt Chandler, as he and some of his friends share lessons brought to them by that greatest of all teachers in the Christian life—suffering. Martin Luther said that suffering, combined with prayer and meditation, is God’s instrument to turn us into faithful theologians. You’ll see that in this book, and you’ll be changed yourself for the reading. Likely, you’ll find yourself recommending it to someone even before you’re finished.”

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Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, NC; Author, *Above All*

“Moving, inspiring, honest, and above all hope-filled. We must all walk through valleys in this life—and if you want to do so without losing joy and hope, then this is the book to read.”

DR. TONY EVANS, Senior Pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship,  
Dallas; President, The Urban Alternative

“An honest, searching, and in places deeply moving book, *Joy in the Sorrow* gives a dozen examples of how suffering can strike, and how God in Christ gets us through it. The stories are very different, but each one shows in its own way that whatever our circumstances, he is enough.”

ANDREW WILSON, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“How does one face suffering with faith? Where do we quarry the resolve and courage? Is God good, even when the circumstances are not? Matt Chandler has wrestled with these questions. He addresses them with wisdom, love, and balance. This is a welcome book for all who suffer.”

MAX LUCADO, Author, *Anxious for Nothing* and  
*Unshakable Hope*

“This book helps us to see how we can look at whatever trials we may face in the light of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and have confidence for ourselves or those we walk alongside in their sorrow, that God will use these things to grow our personal knowledge of him and will glorify Jesus through them. This book is best read before those sorrows come!”

BARBARA SHERWOOD, Navigators UK

“Prepare for your view of suffering to radically shift. *Joy in the Sorrow* will take you to some of your deepest places of sorrow—only to show you that even there, God is who he says he is, and God is right there with you in those times. I’ve watched Matt and Lauren live this, and those who know suffering make the best, most trusted teachers!”

JENNIE ALLEN, Founder and Visionary of IF:Gathering;  
Author, *Nothing to Prove*

“In a day when empty words and false promises attempt to mask the realities of a suffering world, *Joy in the Sorrow* is a refreshingly honest look at the pain we face in our darkest hours and the unexpected hope and joy that can be found when Jesus meets us there. This book will breathe hope into your sufferings, deepen your understanding of God’s purposes in them, and show you how true joy can be found not just after your sorrow but *within* it.”

SARAH WALTON, Author, *Hope When It Hurts*

“I have long thought that the Western church doesn’t have a theology of suffering—and we need one. Which is why I found this book so refreshingly honest, profound, thought-provoking, and ultimately beautifully hope-filled. The people in this book have all wrestled with doubts, cried countless tears, and mourned deeply—but have also found God to be profoundly real and close in their suffering. We can learn much from their experiences if we allow our hearts to be shaped as we read.”

CLAIRE MUSTERS, Author, *Taking off the Mask*

MATT CHANDLER

A N D F R I E N D S



J O Y

I N

T H E

S O R R O W

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(and Its Pastor) Learned to Suffer Well*  
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When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

(Horatio G. Spafford, 1873)

## PREFACE

**E**veryone will suffer. Yet there can be joy in our sorrow. No one in life—no matter who you are, no matter how big your bank account, no matter how great your health, no matter how much knowledge you have of God and the Bible, no matter how obedient you might be in your faith—can avoid suffering. If it hasn't come for you already, it will come soon enough. We've heard it said many times from the pulpit at The Village Church, but we're all just a phone call away from immense hurt and pain.

I say this to be realistic but not to be downbeat—because the very hope of this book is to tell you that even though we will all suffer, we can all find hope and purpose in that suffering. Through Jesus Christ and in the Scriptures, our suffering isn't just validated—it's addressed. God doesn't just say that we will suffer, but he teaches us something of why we suffer and much about how to suffer. And, even greater, he is the God who took the form of a human, a servant, and suffered on our behalf. God understands what it's like to be us. He gets our suffering. And he offers us joy in our sorrow.

I know that's my story, and it's why I felt compelled to help develop this book. Several years ago, within the span of twelve months, I experienced the hardest year of my life. I lost both my grandparents, my newborn daughter was

fighting for her life, my dad suffered a massive heart attack that put him on life support and in a coma for nine days, and we got bed bugs in our house (that might sound minute compared to these other things, but do some googling). It was a dark, difficult, and disorienting time. My family was wounded and broken in more ways than one.

During that period, we often didn't know what to think or how to feel, yet there was a deep-seated joy and peace underneath those thoughts and feelings that sustained us and gave us life. God used years and years at The Village, including the story and sermons of Matt Chandler, and he used my closest family and community sitting with us, crying with us, praying for us, bringing us meals, and encouraging us in the Lord, to give us the faith that helped us walk through our suffering. Through it all, he gave us himself, his presence—he gave us joy.

So, in a sense, I feel as if I owe my life to the people of The Village. This book is just one tangible expression of my gratitude and my desire to take what I've seen and learned and share it with others. As I stepped into a new role at The Village to oversee the discipleship resources we create and share, this was the one project that I knew we had to do. I didn't have a choice. We didn't have a choice. This has been our story, and it's a story we've needed to share, in this way.

The pages that follow tell that story. You will hear from pastors and ministers and members, and former pastors and ministers and members, of The Village. Each chapter represents someone's story—and what God has shown that individual in and through their suffering—that has been a part of our bigger story here. Throughout the book, we also cut to excerpts from the video blogs—vlogs—that Matt recorded as he walked through his own suffering in the wake of collapsing with a brain tumor, and the subsequent surgery and treatment. Together, the stories are a reminder

that we are people who have learned to suffer well together as we've walked together and leaned on the Lord together through so much.

As so many have said, suffering is the common denominator for all of humanity. Unfortunately, many churches and teachers today shy away from it altogether; and so when Christians enter into suffering, they have no framework for their pain and no foundation to stand on, and so they often run away from God amid the pain and sorrow, ending up in total despair. In drawing upon the Scriptures and our own experiences, it is our hope that we can help you, whether you're suffering right now, supporting someone who is, or simply looking to learn how to navigate whatever storm may come your way.

We obviously don't have it all figured out (no one will, this side of eternity), but we have found—albeit sometimes after much despair and heartache—that there can be real joy in our deepest pain. We hope and pray that you find that same joy when suffering comes your way, too.

*David Roark, General Editor*

# 1. I HAD NO ANSWERS

## Joy in the Sorrow of Pastoring a Suffering Church

*Matt Chandler*

I don't think I'll ever forget the sights, sounds, and smells in that hospital room. The smell of latex, tiles, and cleaning supplies filled the air, while a mother, a father, and four grandparents grappled with the sorrow that comes when a baby is born with challenges that will keep him or her from living a "normal" life. There would be no baseball games or soccer tryouts. There would be no Friday night lights (that's Texas dialect for high school football). There would be no promise of a future.

It was the first time I ever saw an elderly man sob, and I felt completely discombobulated. The tiny baby boy had tubes and wires everywhere and laid in what looked to be a plexiglass coffin. I was in my first year at The Village Church in Dallas-Fort-Worth, a church of a few hundred members at that time. I was 28 years old with little pastoral experience and no seminary degree, and I was confused. How can God be glorified in a deadly birth defect in an infant? What is going on here? Between the sobs in the room and my head

spinning with questions, I felt naked. I had no answers, and my heart was broken. I couldn't stop thinking about my own three-month-old daughter at home. What made everything worse was that I felt like I was supposed to be able to minister to my flock with some kind of confidence—and I couldn't.

A few weeks later, my phone rang around 8:30 a.m. I answered and heard a frantic voice on the line saying something I couldn't quite make out, except for the words "accident," "fishing," and "dead." A young couple from the church had gone to the Pacific Northwest to see some extended family and old friends and, most importantly, to introduce them to their newborn son. The husband and new daddy was a true outdoorsman. He had hiked multiple mountains in the United States and was an avid camper, hunter, and fisherman.

Early that morning in Oregon, he woke up and kissed his bride's forehead before quietly standing over his newborn son sleeping in the pack-and-play. Maybe he just stared at him, like new fathers tend to do. Having a son myself, I wonder if he was imagining the days when his boy would be getting up with him to hit the lake and see what good fortune might be waiting for them there. All we know about the accident is that the boat he and a couple of his friends were in capsized, and he drowned. A young man who hiked mountains, lived an active life, and was a great swimmer died that day. I still think about him. I even have a photo of him on the top of some mountain summit looking down on the valleys below. He loved Jesus, his wife, and his son. He was full of life, courage, and grit—a hard worker who would do anything for anyone in need. Why him? There are plenty of lazy, abusive, narcissistic men who neglect or hurt their families. Why not take them?

I could keep telling stories of the heartbreak and loss that seemed to mark my early years at The Village, but

these two experiences highlight what is normative for everyone everywhere: the reality of a fallen world. I found myself longing to do the funeral of an 80-year-old grandparent who loved Jesus and faithfully served him until their dying breath, leaving a legacy of faith in their wake. But that wasn't my experience.

#### SUFFERING HEROES

Not long after that young husband's funeral, I decided that I was going to do a deep dive on suffering, so that I might better equip the men and women God had entrusted me to lead in how to think about suffering, and God's character and purposes in it—and, most of all, in how to face suffering when it came flooding into their lives. And notice that I say “when” and not “if” because all of us will suffer at some point; it's just a matter of when. I wanted to start with a biblical theology of suffering, leading me to dig into the Bible in search of how to make sense of the brokenness that seemed to be everywhere.

As I started to study, I realized that I had read a lot of my Bible without really paying attention to what I was reading.

Suffering in all forms was woven throughout the Scriptures—and not just in the book of Job. On almost every page there was disappointment, depression, doubt, sickness, and death. How had I missed it? I had been reading my Bible for over a decade and hadn't noticed that God's word had more to say about suffering in this life than I could ever have imagined. Sure, I knew Romans 8 v 28—“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” I knew a smattering of other verses, including James 1 v 2-4:

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your*

*faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

But the raw pain, the heartbreak, and the disappointment in the stories of the Scriptures... I was seeing all that for the first time. It was as if I had been given new eyes.

In the Scriptures, there is suffering in almost every hero story. Joseph is sold into slavery, falsely accused, and forgotten in prison. Hagar is used as a commodity, has a child by Abraham, her master, and is then thrown out on her own. Moses roams the desert with grumbling complainers (church folk weren't much different back then) for 40 years only to not enter the promised land. Jeremiah is obedient to say the things the Lord commands him to and go to the places God sends him to, yet is beaten and left naked in a ditch. David spends years surrounded by enemies, not to mention suffering the gut-wrenching pain of his home life that dominated his later years. David, of course, is sinner as well as sinned against, as he summons Bathsheba to come to his palace and pressures her to commit adultery with him (in fact, if you look closely at what happened, it should be seen as rape). Paul is shipwrecked twice, beaten with rods and stones, suffers incessantly from what he calls his "thorn" (2 Corinthians 12 v 7), and is ridiculed incessantly. And at the center of our faith is a suffering Servant, a rejected Savior, a crucified King!

I could write a whole other chapter on the suffering of men and women who are barely mentioned in the Bible, or who aren't mentioned at all. Think for just a few moments about what normal life was like in Egypt under slavery, what life wandering in the desert was like, and the sheer volume of violence and death involved in entering the promised land. And what about the exiles? I assume some but not all of us can imagine what it was like to live on the margins