Beyond Living: A Theological Journey Through Suffering, Healing, and Thriving

by

Keri Lynn Lucas

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Dr. Prince Rivers, D.Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

2025

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis is about suffering—how it shapes us, how we live with it, and how we might still move toward healing and thriving in its midst. I write out of both personal experience and pastoral practice, holding space for the honest questions that suffering always brings: Where is God in this? How do we keep going? What does the church have to offer in the face of real pain? Across six chapters, I trace a trajectory from "suffering from" life's wounds, to "living with" internal and external scars, and ultimately to moving toward the possibility of thriving amid ongoing challenges. Healing is approached as multifaceted: restorative, relational, and transformative, leaving marks that testify to survival and growth.

The thesis engages voices from psychology and medicine, including Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Miriam Greenspan, to highlight resilience and relational support; pastoral perspectives such as Jeffry R. Zurheide illuminate accompaniment in the face of suffering; and sociological and cultural insights—from Robert Bellah and Barna to Brené Brown—situate individual experiences within broader societal and communal contexts. The theological framework draws on Henri Nouwen's vision of authentic leadership and John Wesley's doctrine of sanctification, emphasizing both divine presence and human participation in the journey of thriving. Pop culture narratives, including *The West Wing*, *Hamilton*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter*, serve as illustrative touchstones that make the exploration of suffering and hope accessible and concrete.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that thriving is not the absence of hardship but the capacity to live faithfully, resiliently, and relationally in the midst of it. By integrating

lived experience with theological reflection, psychological research, and cultural insight, it presents a vision of the church and community as spaces where suffering is witnessed, scars are honored, and the ongoing possibility of thriving is cultivated.

The heart of this thesis is a framework for understanding the movement from "suffering from," to "living with," to the possibility of "thriving." Thriving here does not mean the absence of hardship, but the resilience to live faithfully and fully in the midst of it. My conclusion is that the church's calling is to embody this way of life together: to be a community that does not turn away from suffering but enters into it, offering care, presence, and hope. A thriving church is one that walks with people through every season, refusing to let suffering have the final word, and bearing witness instead to God's healing, restoring love.

Dedication

For those who loved Sam, Carol, and Melissa, and for all who live with loss, pain, and suffering.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

To my beloved congregations of Creekwood UMC in Allen, McKenzie UMC in Honey Grove, and Cultiv8Community: in the life of a pastor, it is a rare and profound gift to find an appointment that nurtures and supports her calling beyond the pulpit, especially when that calling involves the rigors and sacrifices of a doctoral program. I have been blessed to experience this incredible grace in not one, but two appointments. Your unwavering encouragement, love, and belief in my work have been a holy source of strength. For this, I am deeply grateful, carrying your support as a constant reminder of the power of community while pursuing God's calling.

To those who loved me before, during, and after this process: here is a toast to my real friends. To those who shared their stories and trusted me with their experiences: your courage and generous vulnerability gave me the heart to tell them. Thank you.

Introduction

My life has been shaped by experiences, some of profound pain, injury, and loss—many of which I would describe as suffering. At twelve, my parents' divorce initiated six emotionally taxing years of moving between two households—a pattern that, even now in adulthood, continues to shape holidays—and left a lasting imprint on my understanding of relationships and reconciliation. In early adulthood so far, I have experienced unexpected losses and disorienting moments of grief that forced me to confront profound questions about mortality, purpose, and the function of my personal faith alongside despair. Moves across cities, changing communities, and the quiet unraveling of friendships and relationships brought their own kinds of ache—a depth of loneliness I did not realize was possible, the kind of pain in the body that lingered, connections that faded, and a longing for stability and belonging. These moments have deeply influenced my personal theology and my pastoral approach to ministry. As a pastor, I have witnessed how it is part of the human condition, shaping not only individual identities but also communal history and culture. I have sat with families facing profound loss, prayed with individuals battling illness, and supported those navigating the personal crises of identity and faith.

One of the most defining moments in my own journey with suffering came on January 1, 2020, when my dear friend Sam died suddenly and without explanation. The unexpected loss devastated me, but not knowing why he died made my grief feel even more overwhelming. Just weeks later, reports of an emerging virus grew into global alarm and eventual nationwide shutdown, causing my personal grief to collide with a

collective crisis. By March, when stay-at-home orders became our new normal, I found myself still navigating the rawness of loss alongside the hollow silence of pandemic isolation and living alone. The combination of these situations changed everything I thought I knew about healing. After Sam's death, I thought that by March I would feel better about my loss—but that was not the case. In fact, my worst days came that summer. From January 1, I woke up every day wishing my life were not real, hoping it were all just a nightmare I could wake from.

My grief had nowhere to go—no more funerals to attend, no way for friends to safely embrace me, no ritual or gathering of those who loved Sam to mark what had been lost. Instead, there was only the suffocating quiet of my first solo apartment and the blue glow of endless Zoom calls. Some days, all I could manage was getting out of bed to join virtual meetings from the couch, propped up by throw pillows. The physically safe choice of isolation compounded everything. Grief, I learned, is not meant to be carried alone, yet the pandemic had severed the very connections that might have helped me bear it. I found myself cut off not just from the presence of others, but from the ordinary rhythms of mourning—the shared meals, the storytelling that occurs when friends gather, the simple act of being held while I wept.

And yet—in what I can only call a crucible of grief, through therapy, medication, and the quiet persistence of love expressed in new ways, even virtually—I stumbled upon something unexpected: healing does not wait for suffering to end. As I write this thesis five years later, I no longer seek to overcome my grief or get better. I have learned instead to live with it. The scar on my heart, shaped by my connection with Sam and the

hurt of losing him, is not a sign of failed healing—but evidence of a deeper truth: healing does not wait for suffering to end—they can happen at the same time.

These experiences have compelled me to grapple with the theological and pastoral questions that suffering inevitably raises. I have encountered suffering both in my own life—in the form of grief, relational fracture, and moments of deep spiritual confusion—and in the lives of those I have walked alongside in pastoral settings. Bearing witness to others' pain, while navigating my own, has led me to confront questions that resist easy answers: How might we understand suffering considering God's character? Where is God present in the midst of pain? How can I articulate—and guide others toward—an expression of faith in God that is honest and avoids the harm of superficial platitudes? And how might the church offer meaningful, compassionate support to those in the depths of despair? These questions are not merely theological abstractions; they emerge from lived realities that demand both intellectual integrity and pastoral care.

This thesis seeks to explore suffering through both theological and pastoral lenses, examining how we understand suffering, its implications for the human condition, and the potential for transformation through divine grace. By integrating theological reflection with practical pastoral insight—and engaging voices from psychology, sociology, theology, and even medical practitioners—I aim to offer an honest and authentic framework for multiple understandings of suffering. This framework seeks to move beyond individual pain to consider the possibilities for communal and spiritual healing and even thriving. Shaped by my personal experiences and observations, I seek to approach suffering not as an abstract concept but as a lived, universal reality that

intersects with questions of faith, identity, and the church's responsibility to bear witness and offer care.

In the first drafts proposing my thesis, I framed the journey of healing as a shift from "suffering from" to "living with" the events of our lives—how I moved from suffering from the loss of Sam to living with it. Yet as a Christian believer, theologian, and pastoral leader, I faced a deeper question: Is living with the best that can be hoped for? If someone trusts in the power, grace, and love of God, could there be more than simply enduring life's hardships? Could coming safely through the storm be only a step toward something greater? This reflection led me to the idea of living toward thriving.

I have found the term "thriving" to be increasingly contested, especially within Christian literature and culture, where it is often criticized as either shallow positivity or as fueling the prosperity gospel. Many advisers and colleagues have expressed skepticism toward the idea of thriving, viewing it as a shallow or superficial goal that overlooks the depths of human suffering. These voices often associate thriving with a form of "toxic positivity" or prosperity gospel, reducing it to a superficial pursuit of happiness and success. While these critiques are fair, my intention is to reclaim the term by clarifying that thriving is not about denying pain, reaching a final state of success, or erasing difficulties. Instead, thriving can be a profound theological process in which we participate in seeking God's good work amid suffering. Thus, I extend an invitation to consider thriving as moving beyond mere survival—an ongoing possibility rather than a guaranteed endpoint. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the concept of thriving, exploring what it might mean to live toward it in both theory and practice.

This thesis traces the journey of suffering from living with pain and then to the possibility of thriving despite life's challenges. Chapter 1 examines the nature of suffering itself. Chapter 2 explores the multiple dimensions of healing. Chapter 3 considers scars, physical and metaphorical, as markers of survival and strength. Chapter 4 investigates a deeper transformation, where living with our suffering becomes a mode of being. Chapter 5 analyzes how the possibility of thriving can emerge even amid lingering wounds. Finally, Chapter 6 addresses the role of the church in accompanying those on this journey, fostering communities in which healing is nurtured and sustained. Together, these chapters aim to illuminate how experiences of suffering and living with pain can reshape the understanding of what it means to live toward the possibility of thriving.

Suffering

Chapter 1 considers whether suffering can, in fact, be defined. Suffering manifests in countless forms, and the ways individuals experience it are diverse, deeply personal, and often resistant to generalization. While this chapter—and indeed this thesis—cannot account for every instance of suffering, it is nevertheless important to examine it carefully. Not all painful experiences necessarily constitute suffering, and what may be deeply wounding for one person may be endured differently by another. In this sense, suffering's subjective nature resists precise definition. Medical experts, too, often struggle to identify a universally accepted explanation, biological or otherwise.

Suffering undeniably occurs—however we understand it, it remains part of the human condition. Its weight can feel insurmountable in the moment, shaping our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Grief, trauma, medical diagnoses, and loss can cast long

shadows over certain seasons of life, at times consuming attention and eroding hope. Situations that ensure the persistence of difficult circumstances or a way of being can cause us to feel the depth of despair. Even amid its deeply personal nature, the reality of suffering calls for engagement, reflection, and care. Suffering can trap us in isolation, persuading us that better days may never come. Although those to whom we might turn for comfort may remind us that things will get better, the overwhelming nature of suffering often clouds our ability to see or even believe this truth. Frankly, there are some losses and circumstances that, by traditional measures, may not get better. In these moments, suffering convinces us that it is a permanent state—that we are stuck in a place we may never escape, that we live in the dark. The weight of this belief can be crushing, making it feel as if any path to healing or relief is unreachable.

Theologically, we are left to ask, where is God in suffering? Does God choose who suffers and determine the nature of their suffering? Is God testing us? These questions have challenged believers and theologians for centuries, revealing the deep complexity and mystery surrounding suffering. In the first chapter, I will tangle with these questions in an attempt to clarify our understanding of suffering and how it relates to the human condition.

Healing

After examining suffering, the next chapter turns to the consideration of healing. It might seem obvious to define healing as the opposite of suffering or how suffering is fixed or even eliminated. Still, even a simple reflection on my personal experience exposed the limitations of such a definition. My research confirmed that healing is a

complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This chapter explores how healing is defined biologically and relationally, how it is portrayed in popular culture, and how various theologians and traditions understand it. These perspectives range from physical restoration to spiritual renewal and relational reconciliation. For example, doctor and medical researcher Thomas Egnew describes healing as "a reinterpretation of life,"[1] highlighting its profound and transformative nature.

Though certainly not exhaustive, I will propose three ways to understand healing. The first is the process by which an injury seemingly improves or disappears entirely, thereby creating the illusion of restoring the body to its original state. This understanding brings to mind the example of a small scrape on a toddler's leg that eventually fades. In such cases, the wound heals, allowing for the inevitability of future scrapes and bruises that come with the adventures of a playful childhood. This perspective highlights a form of healing that is restorative.

Similarly, death is often referred to as final healing, where a person is relieved of their pain and agony, crossing into eternal life. People understand and believe God will "wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."[2] This understanding of death suggests a resolution beyond physical suffering. However, not all cases of healing are complete; sometimes healing occurs, but the injury leaves a scar, that is, a lingering reminder that the body has endured damage.

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[1] T. R. Egnew, "The Meaning Of Healing: Transcending Suffering," *The Annals of Family Medicine* 3, no.3 (2005): 255–62, https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.313.
[2] Revelation 21:4 (all Scripture references will be NRSVUE).

Scars

Before we explore the third type of healing, the next chapter is focused on scars. Even as healing occurs, sometimes painful experiences continue to have a lasting internal impact. Just as an injury to one's leg might leave a scar, internal hurts and experiences of suffering can also leave internal scars. By "internal scars," I am referring to the metaphorical representation of the lasting emotional, spiritual, or mental effects caused by trauma, pain, injury, suffering, or significant distress. These metaphorical scars are not visible in the same way as physical scars, but they shape our emotional and psychological responses, influencing how we interact with the world long after the initial injury or trauma has occurred. Though not physical, they can shape our responses, thoughts, and relationships long after the event has passed. Understanding the relationship between injury and suffering sets the stage for examining how scars not only signify past wounds but can contribute to our ongoing journey of healing, living, and the possibility of thriving. This is not to say that all internal scars continue to have an ongoing impact, but some do.

Trauma research shows that traumatic experiences leave imprints not only in the mind but also in the body.[3] Judith Herman, a leading expert on trauma at Harvard Medical School, puts it differently in her study of trauma recovery, stating, "Trauma is a wound to the spirit. It leaves its mark and, in the healing process, the scar forms not only as evidence of injury but also as a testimony to survival."[4] Herman's insight underscores the deep relationship between suffering and injury, where the wound—whether physical,

[3] Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015).
[4] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (BasicBooks, 2003), 35.

emotional, or spiritual—becomes a crucial moment in the journey of healing, but it leaves a mark. While clinical diagnosis and treatment of trauma should be left to properly trained professionals, decades of their research can help us understand the metaphor of internal scars. Just as physical injury leads to a scar that marks the path of recovery, emotional and spiritual wounds leave marks signifying healing that hold significant meaning in the broader context of healing and growth.

The concept of this metaphor goes beyond physical scars on a human body. The world around us bears witness that after injury, life continues. Giant sequoia trees keep growing even after lightning strikes, still showing where destruction occurred.[5] Coral reefs rebuild after bleaching events, forming new growth patterns around the damaged areas.[6] Pearls form around the irritant that wounded the oyster, transforming injury into something precious while the grain of sand remains at the center.[7] Humans live with what happens to us, sometimes even with the consequences of our past sins, while still seeking to be more like God. The image of the risen Christ appearing before his friends, using his unhealed scars to prove his identity, shows a life that thrives even as it bears its wounds. The marks of Good Friday were not the end of his story; neither are the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual scars we carry the end of ours.

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[5] Philip W. Rundel, "The Relationship Between Basal Fire Scars and Crown Damage in Giant Sequoia," *Ecology* 54, no. 1 (1973): 210–13, https://doi.org/10.2307/1934393.
[6] James P. W. Robinson et al., "Abiotic and Biotic Controls on Coral Recovery 16 Years after Mass Bleaching," *Coral Reefs* 38, no. 6 (2019): 1255–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00338-019-01831-7.
[7] Paul C. Southgate and John S. Lucas, eds., *The Pearl Oyster*, 1st ed (Elsevier Science, 2008).

Living With

We often say we are "suffering from" our ailments, experiences, or injuries. A friend is suffering from a disease, I am suffering from depression, or our family is suffering from the loss of an influential patriarch, or even a child. This language is natural for us, we say it without even thinking about our words. Such language reveals how deeply suffering can become intertwined with our sense of self.

The phrase "suffering from" can attach the suffering to our identity; it names the condition as something we carry, something that defines our existence at that moment. The grief that once filled our world begins to take up a little less space, not because it disappears, but because life grows around it. Cancer patients, for example, often learn to live with being in remission—embracing the gift of health while holding the possibility that their illness might return. After the rupture of a deep betrayal or the end of a love we thought would last, we learn to live with what has happened to us. It changes the way we love others—perhaps with more courage, more honesty, or more tenderness the next time—and it opens us to the joy of being loved again. These are the ways we learn to live with what once felt unbearable, allowing life to stretch beyond suffering without erasing its presence.

The transformation marks a movement of "suffering from" to "living with"—a way of being that integrates our pain into a renewed sense of life. Within the Christian imagination, the reality of suffering does not have to be minimized nor romanticized. Instead, we can hold suffering within the larger narrative of redemption of healing that takes place: where we learn to live with what happens to us. This is when and where the

third type of healing takes place: healing that follows the journey of suffering to living toward thriving.

Thriving

As I mentioned earlier, the term thriving has often been diluted in modern discourse, particularly within Christian contexts. It is frequently linked to shallow messages of success and emotional well-being. The overuse of this term, often associated with self-help and prosperity theology, tends to emphasize outward achievement or renewal rather than deeper and more enduring spiritual growth. As a result, thriving has become a term that some resist, viewing it as a mere cliché rather than a genuine expression of resilience or flourishing.

There are many words to describe an experience that goes beyond merely living with suffering, but my choice to use thriving is intentional. I have chosen "thriving" rather than "flourishing" to describe my theory because it better captures what it means to live fully even in the midst of struggle. While flourishing is commonly linked to positive psychology and denotes optimal well-being, it has faced critique for emphasizing individual achievement and self-actualization, which can obscure the complexities of human suffering. Psychologist C. A. Keyes acknowledges that flourishing is "not easily applicable to individuals experiencing long-term adversity, where conventional markers of well-being may be absent."[8] Renowned theologian Miroslav Volf critiques secular flourishing for its focus on self-derived fulfillment, noting that it "fails to account for the

[8] Corey L. M. Keyes et al., "Change in Level of Positive Mental Health as a Predictor of Future Risk of Mental Illness," *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (2010): 2366–71, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2010.192245.

vital role of divine grace and the relational nature of human flourishing within community."[9] In contrast, the term thriving suggests a more nuanced understanding of well-being—one that embraces growth, resilience, and grace amid adversity. This chapter will explore thriving in depth, including its critiques and redefinitions, but for clarity, I adopt this single term rather than treating flourishing and thriving as interchangeable concepts.

In this chapter, I seek to reclaim the term thriving, offering a richer theological understanding in contrast to the individualistic and materialistic interpretations prevalent today. Drawing from the Wesleyan and United Methodist traditions' concept of "Christian perfection," I argue that thriving is not about escaping suffering but about an ongoing transformation through God's grace in our lives. For United Methodists, perfection is not a human achievement, but a testimony to God's sanctifying power—a continual process of becoming even more aligned with God's will. We believe that our being entirely sanctified or reaching Christian perfection is possible, even if it is improbable—not because of human ability or achievement, but because of the greatness of God. Similarly, I suggest that thriving involves engaging with God's transformative love, seeking where God is moving in our lives, which allows us to thrive despite, or even through, life's challenges. At the same time, I do not claim that suffering is required to experience God's goodness. Thriving, rather, recognizes God's abundant work in our lives in all circumstances, whether or not we are experiencing hardship. In this sense, thriving is not the absence of suffering but the ability to acknowledge and participate in God's work in the midst of suffering.

[9] Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (Yale University Press, 2015).

The Work of the Church

After thoughtfully examining the journey from suffering *from* to living *with* our internal scars and proposing the possibility of thriving, we are left with an essential question: why does this matter for the church? These ideas help us understand the human experience, but what is at stake for the church in responding to them? The final chapter explores practical ways the church might engage thoughtfully and theologically with every stage of this journey—suffering *from*, living *with*, and moving toward the possibility of thriving. I conclude with a vision for a church where all people are loved and supported, no matter what they are going through, and where those who are suffering, living with, or thriving can help one another believe in and participate in the journey together.

In the work that follows, I do not seek to merely offer a simple solution to life's pain, injuries, and persistent struggles, but instead explore what it really means to thrive when life is marked by suffering. While my own experience inspires these ideas, I seek to dialogue with a wide range of voices—medical doctors, church leaders, theologians past and present, psychologists and sociologists, even a fantasy author and television scriptwriter. All of these voices come together to help me show, I believe, that thriving is possible and that we can move toward it even while our suffering is still present. The chapters that follow move between lived experience and critical analysis, showing how this vision of thriving amid suffering can both be understood and lived out.

Chapter 1: The Many Faces of Suffering: Definition, Context, and Responses

Introduction: What Is Suffering?

Suffering is an inevitable and universal aspect of the human experience, yet it remains one of the most elusive concepts to consistently and accurately define. It transcends physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries, influencing individuals in deeply personal and profoundly communal ways. Suffering takes many forms—illness, relational loss, systemic injustice, loneliness, personal grief, and more. Suffering challenges how we understand purpose, resilience, meaning, and the Divine. This chapter seeks to understand suffering through a multifaceted lens.

Many disciplines share an understanding that suffering is deeply personal, contextual, subjective, and often messy. Two individuals can experience the same event yet respond to it in entirely different ways—their suffering is not the same. For example, two people grieving the loss of a loved one may have vastly different emotional reactions, processes, and timelines, shaped by their past experiences, emotional resilience, and coping mechanisms. A person's cultural background may also influence how they interpret and cope with suffering, as it is filtered through communal values or spiritual practices that affect both their personal response and the support they receive from their community.[1]

While there are many subjective elements to suffering, it is still worth exploring the ways it might be approached more broadly. Building on this, by examining how

[1] The experience of systemic injustices can also lead to profound suffering, a subject worthy of its own thorough exploration but unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

suffering is understood, perceived, and navigated, we begin to understand its pervasive presence and its transformative potential in the journey toward thriving. Each perspective adds richness and depth to the discussion, allowing us to appreciate the complexity of suffering in its full scope. To guide this discussion, we will explore understandings of suffering in three broad categories: embodied, theological, and cultural.

Understanding Suffering: Embodied Models

Biological and relational perspectives understand suffering as an embodied experience—felt in the body, shaped in the nervous system, and intensified or alleviated through human connection. Renowned medical anthropologist and physician Dr. Arthur Kleinman, in his seminal work *The Illness Narratives*, frames suffering as a deep cultural and relational experience. Though rooted in the medical debates of the 1980s, Kleinman's work provides a useful starting point for clarifying the biomedical understanding of suffering today, as he challenged the reductionist view that confined suffering to physical symptoms or pathology and instead emphasized its broader, multifaceted nature. He argues that suffering extends beyond bodily distress, encompassing the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of a person's life. For Kleinman, suffering is shaped not only by an individual's internal experience but also by the societal structures and cultural contexts in which that individual is embedded. He writes, "What is distinctive about illness as a form of experience is that it calls into question, forces changes in, or even breaks apart our worlds—the networks of relationships and transactions that make up the business of living, the connections with others that in a

sense locate us in life and create our own personhood."[2] This insight from Kleinman underscores how the meaning and expression of suffering are both external and internal, closely tied to an individual's identity, relationships, and place within their community.

Since the time of Kleinman's observations in the 1980s, there have been many advances in standard medical practice. Medical care today often emphasizes the whole person—through spiritual care centers, research on chronic pain management, and integrative approaches that address the mind-body-spirit connection. These developments reflect a growing recognition that effective care must extend beyond physical symptoms to the broader dimensions of a person's life. Hospitals, for example, now incorporate spiritual care teams not only to meet accreditation standards set by The Joint Commission, which requires that patients' spiritual needs be assessed and respected, but also to acknowledge the profound ways suffering extends beyond the body.[3] Chaplains working within these teams bring gifts of compassionate presence, facilitate spiritual conversations, and help patients and families navigate the existential challenges that accompany illness and suffering.

Professor Harold G. Koenig, a leading researcher in religion and health at Duke University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, has established compelling evidence for the positive role of spiritual care in healthcare settings, specifically through chaplains. His research indicates that "patients who receive spiritual support from hospital chaplains report greater overall well-being, lower levels of anxiety,

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[2] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (Basic Books, 1988), 31.
[3] *Standards FAQs* (The Joint Commission, 2021), https://www.jointcommission.org/standards/standards-faqs/.

and improved ability to cope with illness."[4] His contributions prove especially valuable in palliative care and trauma settings, where patients grapple with their suffering and its implications.

Kleinman also expanded the conversation beyond the confines of Western medicine by challenging its individualistic focus. His work underscores that suffering is never purely personal but is always embedded in relational and cultural contexts. In *Culture and Depression*, Kleinman and coauthor Byron Good argue that "the way people express and interpret suffering is inseparable from the cultural frameworks in which they live." [5] Cultural differences in expressing psychological distress provide compelling examples of this phenomenon. In China, people often express emotional distress through physical symptoms—a process called somatization. Neurasthenia offers a clear explanation: this condition presents with tiredness, dizziness, and headaches that reflect underlying psychological struggles. Kleinman's study revealed that many Chinese patients diagnosed with neurasthenia actually met Western criteria for depression. However, they articulated their suffering through physical complaints rather than emotional distress.[6] Of course, somatization is not unique to non-Western contexts; in Western cultures, people also experience physical manifestations of psychological distress—such as stomachaches or headaches when anxious. The key difference lies in interpretation: Western medicine has often treated such expressions as denial or

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[4] Harold G. Koenig, ed., *Medicine, Religion, and Health: Where Science & Spirituality Meet*, Templeton Science and Religion Series (Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), 115.
[5] Arthur Kleinman, *Culture and Depression: Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*, 1st ed, with Byron J. Good, Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care Series, v. 16 (University of California Press, 1986), 12.
[6] Arthur Kleinman, "Neurasthenia and Depression: A Study of Somatization and Culture in China: Report Number One of the University of Washington Hunan Medical College Collaborative Research Project111222," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 6, no. 2 (1982): 117–90, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00051427.

pathology, whereas in other cultural settings they are regarded as legitimate forms of communicating suffering.

In many Islamic traditions, *sabr*—often understood as patience and perseverance—is a foundational virtue that shapes believers' understanding of suffering. It encompasses religious, social, and psychological dimensions, framing hardships not only as tests of faith but also as opportunities for spiritual growth and resilience through steadfastness and trust in God.[7] Indigenous communities, too, engage with suffering through narrative and ritual, using communal storytelling and ceremonies to process grief and loss in ways that reinforce collective healing rather than solely individual coping. For example, among some Native American groups, healing circles and sweat lodge ceremonies provide structured communal spaces for sharing pain, reconnecting with cultural identity, and restoring relational harmony—an approach that contrasts with the individualized focus of many Western therapeutic models.[8] Adopting a more holistic and globally informed perspective invites us to reconsider our assumptions and attend to the culturally diverse ways in which suffering is experienced and understood.

Non-Western perspectives invite us to look at suffering not just as a personal, biological experience, but also as something shaped by relationships and community, highlighting how deeply interconnected our lives are. The work of social theorist and psychologist Brené Brown provides valuable insights. Brown's research on vulnerability and shame underscores the essential role of connection and empathy in mitigating

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[7] Fahadz Mannan Lulu, "Understanding Sabr as a Way of Life," paper presented at The 2024 PWU Research Festival, September 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384141341_Understanding_Sabr_as_a_Way_of_Life.

[8] Teresa Naseba Marsh et al., "The Sweat Lodge Ceremony: A Healing Intervention for Intergenerational Trauma and Substance Use," *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 9, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2018.9.2.2.

suffering. She argues, "Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That's why it loves secrecy and silence. If we can share our stories with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive."[9] Brown's work highlights how confronting the shame that often accompanies suffering can open pathways to greater empathy and relational healing, thereby extending Kleinman's emphasis on the interconnectedness inherent to human suffering. By acknowledging the shared, vulnerable experiences of others, both Kleinman and Brown urge a shift away from isolating suffering to embracing collective, community-based healing practices.

Understanding Suffering: Theological Models

Throughout history, there have been many ways in which theologians have sought to understand suffering. Some identified suffering as a means of empathizing or relating to the experience of the suffering Christ. Blaise Pascal believed suffering to be an essential part of Christian living, understanding suffering as the natural state of Christians that brings us closer to Jesus. He said, "The Christian's greatest good is suffering. To unite oneself with Jesus Christ by such a bond is infinitely more important than enjoying all the rest of the world."[10] Christian mystics understood suffering to be necessary for union with God, typically identifying themselves with the suffering Christ on a cross. St. Thérèse of Lisieux stated, "I choose all that is most difficult; I choose all that will lead me to God."[11] Many early Christian martyrs, including several women, employed vivid

[9] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Avery, 2015), 72.
[10] Blaise Pascal and A. J. Krailsheimer, *Pensées*, Rev. ed, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books; Penguin Books USA, 1995), 553.
[11] *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, Third edition, with Teresa od Dzieciątka Jezus and John Clarke (ICS Publications, 1996).

metaphors to articulate their suffering, expressing how their trials brought them closer to God and reinforced the communal identity and faith of early Christian communities. For example, St. Perpetua's account, recorded in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, portrays her martyrdom as both communion with God and testimony to others. She exhorted her companions, "Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, and do not let our sufferings be a stumbling block to you."[12] Her suffering was not merely endurance of pain but a witness of faith that strengthened the church, demonstrating how God's presence could be revealed in the midst of affliction.

As Christianity became more mainstream, theologians from the Enlightenment and modern eras clarified and expanded the understanding of suffering, introducing new frameworks for considering its existential, psychological, and social dimensions. These theologians sought to answer questions about the origin of suffering. John Wesley's understanding emphasized that suffering plays a role in sanctification and reflects God's sovereign governance—not as a direct cause imposed by God, but as something God permits within the human experience. Wesley wrote, "God allows us to suffer, not that we might merely endure it, but that we might be perfected in love."[13] Paul Tillich furthered the discussion of suffering by seeing it as intrinsic to the human condition, connecting it directly to the concept of being. For Tillich, suffering was part of the terms and conditions that come with our finitude as human creatures, not a choice we made. He contended, "Suffering is not merely the result of man's finite condition, but his capacity to suffer is an ultimate expression of his finite being."[14] Unlike traditional theological

[12] Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 135.
[13] John Wesley et al., *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Abingdon Press, 1991), 115.
[14] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 2nd ed, Yale Nota Bene (Yale University Press, 2000), 141.

accounts that often trace human suffering to the Fall, Tillich locates suffering in the very nature of human existence, emphasizing that it arises from our finite, limited being rather than from moral failure or sin.

Similarly, Dorothy Day, a Catholic social activist and writer, revived the ideas of the early Christian martyrs. She emphasized the transformative power of suffering, especially in the context of solidarity with the poor. Day saw suffering not merely as a burden but as a way to participate in Christ's redemptive suffering as the purpose for being. She wrote, "We are all called to share in the suffering of Christ, and this, I think, is the meaning of our lives. To suffer with others, to live among the poor and the outcast, is to find Christ."[15] Day's understanding of suffering was grounded in a profound physical—not merely theoretical—solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed, recognizing that their suffering is not to be avoided but embraced as participation in the suffering of Christ.

While earlier perspectives on suffering emphasized identifying with Christ's suffering, marginalized theologians push us further, helping us better listen to overlooked voices. Womanist theologian Dr. Delores S. Williams directly challenges the idea that suffering unites us with God, particularly for Black women who have faced centuries of exploitation. She argues, "Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united with God through this kind of suffering,"[16] rejecting the dangerous notion that marginalized groups should view their suffering as a divine pathway. Williams calls

[15] Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (Harper & Row, 1981), 239.
[16] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, 1993), 167.

for a theology of liberation, healing, and justice—one that affirms God's solidarity with the oppressed and demands active resistance to suffering, not passive acceptance.

Building on Williams's critique of suffering as a redemptive tool imposed on marginalized individuals, other theologians expand the discourse by framing suffering within a communal, experiential, and transformative context. Mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz reinterprets suffering not as divine punishment or an isolated tragedy, but as a catalyst for collective resistance and justice. She contends, "In the midst of suffering, the power of God becomes manifest in the solidarity with the oppressed. In this way, suffering is neither a divine punishment nor an isolated tragedy; it becomes a means of transformation, a platform for justice."[17] For Isasi-Díaz, suffering is thus understood as a communal experience that reveals God's presence through solidarity and inspires collective action toward liberation and social change.

Queer theologian Patrick Cheng reflects, "Suffering is a central part of our human experience, but queer suffering provides a unique lens through which we can understand God's redemptive love. By acknowledging our suffering, we enter into the redemptive suffering of Christ."[18] Cheng's perspective differs by explicitly linking the suffering of marginalized communities to Christ's redemptive suffering, emphasizing not only communal connection but also spiritual transformation. His view broadens the scope of suffering to encompass societal and relational dimensions that foster justice and mutual healing.

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[17] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha =: In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 99.
[18] Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (Seabury Books, 2011), 112.

Together, these diverse theological perspectives challenge traditional Christian understandings of suffering—particularly the notion that suffering is inherently redemptive—which, when uncritically applied, has clearly contributed to harm or marginalization across various social identities. By centering the experiences of oppressed communities, they highlight the critical importance of listening to voices historically excluded from theological discourse, thereby enriching and expanding our collective understanding of suffering.

Understanding Suffering: Cultural Models

Throughout history, suffering has been a constant presence in human experience, examined across disciplines and woven into countless cultural stories and narratives. Even the pop culture of many eras, across various mediums, has grappled with the concept of suffering and attempted to define it. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri encapsulated suffering as "what we experience in the inferno, where souls endure endless torment and never find redemption,"[19] using it to explore the eternal consequences of wrongdoing. The classic novel turned Broadway musical, *Les Misérables*, presents the idea that "There is nothing like suffering to make you understand the hearts of others," reflecting suffering as a means of compassion and empathy for others.[20]

In much of modern literature, suffering serves as both catalyst and sculptor—often moving the plot while shaping the characters themselves. George Lucas, in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, presents suffering as the inevitable endpoint of

[19] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Dover Publications, Inc., 2017), canto 34, line 142.
[20] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, trans. Christine Donougher, with Robert Tombs (Penguin Books, 2015).

unchecked negative emotions: “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.”[21] Here, suffering is defined as corruption—the final stage of moral decay that results from failing to master one’s emotions. In contrast, J. K. Rowling explores suffering as a revelatory force in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Through Dumbledore’s guidance to Harry, Rowling presents suffering not as an endpoint but as a test of character that can either diminish us or strengthen our resolve. When Dumbledore tells Harry, “We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, but battle on.”[22] Rowling defines suffering as something to be endured and overcome—a challenge that reveals whether we have the courage to persist despite pain. The characters’ responses further illuminate these different understandings: while Lucas’s narrative warns against the emotional cascade that leads to suffering, Rowling’s characters demonstrate that suffering can be met with resilience, loyalty, and the choice to continue fighting for what matters.

These cultural depictions resonate deeply with theological reflections and personal experiences of suffering, highlighting their capacity to transform, challenge, or redefine human resilience. However, they also reveal the ongoing difficulty in defining suffering. Literature often portrays suffering as a source of redemption or growth, while theological frameworks frequently ground it in spiritual solidarity or divine purpose. These overlapping views suggest that suffering is not only a universally shared human experience but one whose meaning is shaped by the cultural, spiritual, and personal lenses through which it is understood.

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[21] *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999), 133 minutes.
[22] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 1. publ., 1. ed (Bloomsbury, 2005), 151.

Contextualizing Suffering

After considering various ways suffering is understood, it is evident that suffering cannot be reduced to a single explanation; however, a clarification must serve as a useful starting point for our work moving forward to consider how thriving might enter into suffering. I will define suffering as a profound and ongoing experience of pain that can affect a person's body, mind, and/or spirit, is shaped by the intensity or duration of the pain and by the individual's response to it. The manifestations are diverse: emotional pain, mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, or loneliness, physical pain from chronic illness, injury, or disease; relational pain, arising from broken relationships or betrayal, and spiritual suffering (which might involve a crisis of faith or a sense of disconnection from God). Beyond the individual experience, suffering extends to social and systemic contexts, such as poverty, discrimination, injustice, and the devastation caused by natural disasters or war. Life transitions or loss—whether the death of a loved one or navigating unfulfilled dreams—can also spark the suffering of profound grief. Additionally, suffering is not always solitary; communities often experience collective suffering, sharing in grief, hardship, poverty, or tragedy. While this definition cannot capture every context or nuance, it must serve as our starting point and as a framework for this thesis as we consider how we might thrive even while we are suffering.

While some schools of thought focus on defining suffering by its characteristics, a particularly meaningful perspective emphasizes how personal pain can serve as a means of transformation. For those focused on their faith, suffering can lead to spiritual growth and a deeper connection to both God and others. For theologians like Henri Nouwen, the

focus is less on defining suffering and more on prescribing a path forward through it. In this view, competing theological interpretations take a backseat to the lived reality that suffering—particularly in its transformative potential—plays a vital role in both individual and communal life. Nouwen writes in *The Wounded Healer*, "Suffering can be the means of growth, not only for ourselves but also for the communities to which we belong."[23] In this way, Nouwen emphasizes that suffering is not merely a personal experience, but an avenue for communal transformation and spiritual growth.

While traditional theological frameworks often focus on the spiritual dimensions of suffering, trauma-informed care expands this view and offers insights that can help us understand and respond to suffering more effectively. Trauma represents a specific subset of suffering—intense, often disruptive events that can overwhelm a person's ability to cope. Not all suffering rises to the level of trauma, but research on trauma provides valuable guidance for addressing the emotional and relational dimensions of suffering. Karen McClintock, a leading author and educator in trauma-informed pastoral care, focuses on the interplay between psychology and ministry in addressing trauma within faith communities. Her work, including *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care* and *When Trauma Wounds*, equips clergy and congregational leaders to navigate the enduring impacts of suffering with empathy and intentional care in the church community. McClintock's insights underscore that**,** "When trauma is borne alone, the isolation is also traumatizing."[24] She emphasizes that suffering is not merely personal but also relational,

[23] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (The Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 76.
[24] Karen A. McClintock, *When Trauma Wounds: Pathways to Healing and Hope*, Living with Hope (Fortress Press, an imprint of 1517 Media, 2019), 62.

highlighting the importance of fostering supportive, communal spaces where individuals can process trauma together, rather than enduring it in isolation.

By integrating the science of trauma-informed care, McClintock's work enables faith communities to approach suffering in ways that address not only the spiritual dimensions but also the emotional and psychological realms. Her work in trauma-informed care extends beyond faith communities, offering valuable guidance for any organization seeking to foster a culture of care and mutual support in the face of trauma. Building on McClintock's emphasis on relational healing, Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, expands the conversation by addressing the long-term, systemic nature of suffering rooted in injustice—particularly within marginalized communities.[25] While trauma-informed care highlights the emotional and psychological toll of suffering, Stevenson draws attention to how deeply embedded structures of oppression perpetuate collective trauma across generations.

At the same time, Stevenson reframes suffering as an opportunity for connection and transformation. He often states, "If you are willing to get closer to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world."[26] For Stevenson, proximity to suffering is not merely about personal empathy; it is a call to engage with the collective pain of society. His work urges us not to turn a blind eye, but instead to adopt a posture of active solidarity—standing alongside those who suffer in order to truly understand the depth of their pain and to begin the slow, necessary work of restorative justice. Through

[25] The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) is a nonprofit organization founded by Bryan Stevenson that works to end racial injustice and improve the criminal justice system, providing legal aid to those who are wrongfully convicted or facing unfair punishment. See *Equal Justice Initiative*, https://eji.org/.
[26] Bryan Stevenson and Geoff Blackwell, *Bryan Stevenson: I Know This to Be True: On Equality, Justice & Compassion*, I Know This to Be True (Chronicle Books, 2020).

this lens, connection to suffering becomes not only a source of individual healing but a pathway to communal restoration and structural change.

Building on Bryan Stevenson's emphasis on proximity and the transformative power of engaging with suffering, philosopher and social critic Cornel West deepens the conversation by focusing explicitly on the communal and spiritual dimensions of suffering and its relation to justice. He connects suffering to the broader themes of race, hope, and love, stating, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."[27] For West, suffering is both a condition to be confronted and a call to collective action rooted in love and care. This perspective complements Stevenson's focus on closeness to pain by insisting that true justice involves not just recognizing suffering but actively repairing and healing the wounds it causes. Together, Stevenson and West's frameworks challenge individuals and institutions to move beyond isolated responses to suffering, instead embracing justice as an act of communal love capable of transforming both systems and society.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as a spiritual and social leader, offers a theological perspective that emphasizes suffering's potential to inspire reconciliation and justice. Tutu drew from his own experiences during South Africa's apartheid era, where he witnessed and endured profound systemic suffering. Yet, his understanding of suffering focuses on the redemptive possibilities found in forgiveness and restorative justice. As he notes, "Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering—remembering and not

[27] Cornel West and David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving out Loud: A Memoir*, 2nd ed (SmileyBooks; Distributed by Hay House, 2010), 136.

using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning."[28] Through his leadership in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu framed suffering not as an endpoint but as a means to foster healing and community renewal.[29] His insights highlight the interconnectedness of personal and communal pain, urging society and individuals to seek justice without relinquishing compassion or the hope of restoration.

Adding another perspective to the tapestry of understanding suffering, psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan, known for her work on grief, trauma, and dark emotions, advocates for a perspective that views suffering not as a barrier to overcome but as an essential process to integrate what she calls "dark emotions"—grief, fear, and despair. In her book *Healing through Dark Emotions*, Greenspan writes, "When we stop fighting the emotional darkness that inevitably enters our lives, we begin to find the light within it."[30] By moving through suffering rather than avoiding it, Greenspan argues, both individuals and communities can access pathways to healing, resilience, and emotional growth. I share her belief in the transformative potential of embracing the darkness of suffering, as it allows individuals not only to face their pain but also to integrate it into their fuller emotional experience.

Building on Greenspan's insights into embracing dark emotions, cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks[31] deepens the conversation by emphasizing the vital role

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[28] Sandiswa Lerato Kobe, "Forgiveness and Ubuntu: A Study of the Theological Contribution of Desmond Tutu" (PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2023), HFE97519520231205, https://doi.org/10.5463/thesis.502.

[29] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Desmond Tutu, sought to address human rights abuses under apartheid through truth-telling and restorative justice. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission, https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

[30] Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (Shambhala, 2004), 34.

[31] bell hooks intentional uses lowercase letters for her name as a way of focusing her attention on her work and ideas rather than on herself personally.

of community and love in navigating suffering. In *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks asserts, "Love is an action, a participatory emotion, a willingness to act."[32] She situates love as a transformative and collective force that fosters resilience and healing, especially for those who are suffering. Her approach broadens the view of suffering beyond just personal struggle or healing to include the importance of community care and social justice. Together, Greenspan and hooks show that truly addressing suffering means paying attention to both our inner emotions and the social challenges around us, creating resilience that is both personal and shared.

Theodicy

Theodicy is the theological effort to reconcile God's goodness and power with the reality of suffering—often considering how some suffering is connected to evil. It is important to note that suffering and evil are not the same: suffering includes all forms of pain and hardship, while evil involves moral wrongdoing or malevolent forces. Bringing theodicy into the conversation helps us understand suffering not merely as a philosophical or moral problem, but as something that intersects with questions of justice, human agency, and systemic oppression, broadening the discussion to include lived human experiences. However, not all suffering fits neatly into this framework; some suffering does not arise from moral or metaphysical evil in the traditional theological sense. Instead, certain theodicies explore the complex relationships between human choice, an understanding of the Fall, divine justice, human pain, and systemic injustice.

[32] bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*, Love Song to the Nation Ser, v. 1 (William Morrow, 2018), 99.

Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica*, explores, among other things, the problem of evil, namely that God permits evil in order to bring about a greater good. He wrote, "God, therefore, is not the author of evil, because he does not will evil as an end, but as something ordered to the good."[33] Aquinas's reflections provide a framework for understanding suffering: it is a permitted consequence of a fallen world that, while painful, can foster spiritual growth and point toward a greater divine purpose, showing that human hardship is not evidence of divine malevolence but part of a larger redemptive order.

While Aquinas frames suffering as a permitted consequence of a fallen world, oriented toward divine purpose and spiritual growth, theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and James Cone turn the focus toward God's relational presence, emphasizing divine solidarity with those who experience suffering in real, lived contexts. Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson expands the conversation by emphasizing God's solidarity with suffering humanity. In her work *She Who Is*, she writes, "God is not an unfeeling spectator but a compassionate co-sufferer, intimately involved in the struggles of creation."[34] Black theologian James Cone deepens this perspective in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, situating his theodicy within the context of systemic injustice, particularly racism. He asserts, "The cross is the most empowering symbol of God's solidarity with the powerless, because God, in Christ, takes on the suffering of the oppressed."[35] These perspectives challenge classical theodicies that frame suffering primarily as an abstract

[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I, q. 49, art. 2.
[34] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1992), 94.
[35] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Paperback edition (Orbis Books, 2013), 156.

problem of evil, instead rooting it in lived experiences of oppression and divine accompaniment.

Jeffrey Zurheide offers a practical approach to theodicy grounded in both tradition and pastoral care. He articulates what he calls the "troublesome triad of theodicy: God is great; God is good; evil is real."[36] This succinct formulation captures the central paradox of theodicy—the seemingly irreconcilable coexistence of divine attributes with human suffering. As he explains, "But in the world as we know it, we must in some way recognize another dimension, an alien factor, which is characterized by tragic suffering—universal evil. Add this reality to the omnipotence and righteousness of God, and we have the great paradox of theodicy—evil existing simultaneously with a God of limitless power and goodness."[37] Zurheide's contribution is particularly valuable because it bridges theoretical theology with pastoral practice.

While some theological frameworks attempt to resolve this paradox by diminishing either divine power or goodness, Zurheide insists on maintaining both while honestly acknowledging the reality of suffering. This includes suffering that is tragic or painful without being caused by evil—illness, natural disasters, or random misfortune—reminding us that not all suffering stems from wrongdoing or moral failure. Building on this, John Swinton emphasizes that theodicy is not primarily about explaining why God allows suffering, but about how God's care is enacted in concrete, relational, and communal ways. As he writes, "In Christ, the evil and suffering of the world are absorbed and transformed. In like manner, the community that seeks to image God … is called to

[36] Jeffry R. Zurheide, *When Faith Is Tested: Pastoral Responses to Suffering and Tragic Death*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Fortress Press, 1997), 26.
[37] Zurheide. *When Faith Is Tested,* 27.

develop modes of being and forms of action that will similarly absorb suffering and resist evil."[38] This perspective highlights that pastoral theodicy must engage with the lived realities of suffering, emphasizing the relational and embodied dimensions of human experience. It also complements Zurheide's approach by showing that while divine power and goodness are held in tension with the reality of suffering, the church—and by extension, pastoral care—provides practical avenues for embodying God's response, offering support, presence, and communal care to those who suffer. By attending to both the theological and experiential dimensions, Swinton's framework reinforces the idea that theodicy is as much about how we live and act in response to suffering as it is about understanding it.

Combining these perspectives, we can see that a robust theodicy must hold divine power and goodness in tension with the reality of suffering, while also attending to the lived, embodied experience of those who suffer. This approach accounts for God's self-regulation—the divine choice and grace to allow human freedom—without diminishing omnipotence, and emphasizes the importance of pastoral presence, relational care, and community in responding to suffering. Furthermore, both Zurheide's and Swinton's insights highlight how sufferers often internalize blame or remain silent, assuming they have caused their suffering. Together, these views argue for a pastoral theodicy that maintains theological integrity while fully engaging the complexity, unpredictability, and relational reality of human suffering.

[38] John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Wiiliam B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 246.

Human Responses to Suffering

Religious institutions, while aiming to offer spiritual comfort, sometimes provide theological explanations that—despite good intentions—can unintentionally deepen suffering rather than ease it. Some faith communities rely on oversimplified interpretations that are not always rooted in scripture. For example, grieving parents who have experienced the death of a child might be told, "God needed another angel." Those facing injustice might hear, "God is testing your faith" or "this suffering is part of God's plan." A friend of mine, who serves as a pastor while enduring several chronic illnesses, has confided that well-intentioned friends, colleagues, and even members of her congregation have told her, "If you have enough faith, God will heal you." While clearly spoken out of care, these words can misrepresent theology by implying that suffering is either God's will or the result of weak faith.

While harmful theological responses persist, they do not represent all approaches to suffering. Many faith communities and clergy members offer nuanced, compassionate support that recognizes the complexity of suffering. However, when suffering is framed primarily as a test of faith or divine punishment, the consequences can be damaging. Individuals may internalize blame for their pain, oversimplifying explanations that fail to address suffering's depth, and people may feel alienated from their faith rather than comforted by it. These challenges underscore the urgent need for more thoughtful and theologically sound responses to suffering.

The use of oversimplified but compassionate explanations is not limited to faith communities. Broader societal attitudes toward suffering often prioritize productivity, positivity, and self-sufficiency, leaving little room for those who experience prolonged

pain or struggle. As a result, people often try to "fix" suffering with overly simplistic advice: A person struggling with depression is told, "Just think of five good things." A worker experiencing burnout is advised, "Just power through—it will get better, eventually." Someone battling addiction hears, "You simply need more willpower." These responses not only fail to help but can make suffering feel even more isolating, as they place the burden of recovery solely on the individual. They ignore the reality that suffering is often persistent, unpredictable, and resistant to quick solutions. Instead of offering shallow encouragement, a better approach involves creating space for people to name their pain, seek support, and be met with genuine care rather than pressure to "get over it."

In personal relationships, people often struggle to respond well to the suffering of others, leading to comments that unintentionally dismiss pain rather than offer support. A couple struggling with infertility may hear, "As soon as you stop trying, it will happen." A young person grieving the loss of a dream may be told, "At least you are young—you have plenty of time." Someone going through a divorce, not yet ready to move on, might be reassured, "There are plenty of fish in the sea." Though intended to comfort, these statements minimize grief and fail to acknowledge the depth of loss. Rather than allowing space for honest emotions, they pressure individuals to move forward prematurely. A better relational response is to practice deep listening, validate the reality of suffering, and offer presence without feeling the need to "fix" what cannot be easily fixed.

As previously stated, suffering is not just personal—it is often shaped by systemic and structural realities that create or perpetuate pain. However, well-meaning but inadequate responses frequently shift responsibility away from institutions and onto

individuals. For example, a person experiencing poverty is told, “If you just work harder, you can get out of this situation,” ignoring systemic economic barriers. A survivor of abuse is pressured to “forgive and move on” without consideration for justice or accountability. A community devastated by a natural disaster hears, “Trust that everything happens for a reason,” rather than being met with tangible support. These responses not only invalidate suffering but also absolve communities, churches, and institutions of their responsibility to advocate for justice and provide meaningful aid. The church has a role to play in challenging these structural injustices, ensuring that its response to suffering is not just spiritual but also practical and transformative.

Rather than relying on these oversimplified but well-intentioned responses, both society at large and especially the church do have more meaningful roles to play. Suffering is a universal reality that touches all people across different cultures and contexts, demanding responses that go beyond easy answers. The church, in particular, is called to embrace a more faithful and compassionate approach—one that offers presence, support, and concrete action. Chapter 6 will explore how the church can accompany individuals and communities on the journey from suffering to thriving, addressing both the personal and systemic dimensions of pain.

Summary

As we reflect on the layers of how suffering might be understood, we are confronted with the undeniable truth that it is not always a temporary or passing experience but often a continuous and painful reality. While there may be a temptation to shift the focus to the eventual promise of healing or how we understand what might

alleviate our suffering, it is important to keep in mind that many live each day with suffering—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—that cannot be easily glossed over. These experiences remind us that suffering is not simply a season of life to be bypassed on the way to resolution but a lived reality that profoundly shapes human existence. It influences not only what is endured but also who a person becomes in the midst of it, even when healing does not fully arrive. As we move to explore the dynamics of healing in the next chapter, it is essential to acknowledge the rawness and depth of ongoing, daily suffering.

While writing this chapter, I was reminded not only of my own experiences of suffering but also of those carried by people I know. With every sentence I write, I ask myself the question, "Would I have believed this when I was suffering?" When Sam died, I found myself quoting one of my favorite numbers from the musical, *Hamilton*: "There are moments that the words don't reach, there's a suffering too powerful to name…"[39] I found these words to be true: there are some moments of suffering that there are truly no words to describe or alleviate the experience. Suffering remains an unpredictable, complex, and deeply personal experience. Recognizing this forces a confrontation with a difficult but necessary truth: suffering is real, painful, and demands acknowledgment before any resolution or healing can be meaningfully pursued. In such contexts, society and the church must offer more than empty platitudes, instead creating space for honest recognition of pain and preparing the ground for reflection on how healing might be found, nurtured, and woven into the intricate fabric of human life.

[39] Lin Manuel Miranda, *It's Quiet Uptown*, Hamilton: An American Musical, Atlantic Records, 2015.

Chapter 2: The Complexities of Healing: Definitions, Pathways, and Practices

Growing up in a military family, Deborah's path seemed almost preordained: she would become a military chaplain, following in the footsteps of a life immersed in service.[1] *Her calling combined spiritual guidance with an intimate understanding of military life—physically running alongside soldiers in training and spiritually leading them in worship. She and I met in seminary, where she often spoke lovingly of her fiancé, a fellow military-bound high school sweetheart. Their marriage began joyfully amid the demands of military life and her doctoral studies, with Deborah navigating the complex roles of military chaplain and military wife. Then came the devastating thunderbolt. As Deborah neared completing her doctorate, her husband unexpectedly asked for a divorce, shattering the foundation of everything she thought they had built. The emotional toll was immense: she wrestled with feelings of grief, betrayal, and self-doubt, while also grappling with the relational rupture of losing a partner who had been central to her life and identity. Their subsequent counseling was not meant to save the marriage but to end it with dignity—what Deborah later described as "providing hospice care for a terminally ill relationship." In that painful space, supported by a community of friends, family, and colleagues, Deborah discovered something profound: healing was not about restoring what was lost, but about, out of death, forging a new life. Her journey revealed that true healing creates space for the life waiting to unfold, rather than desperately trying to revive what had been.*

Introduction: The Complexity of Healing

After having explored the complexity and depth of suffering—its multifaceted nature and the way it is shaped by context—we now turn our attention to healing. We are

[1] The case studies presented at the beginning of some chapters are drawn from my pastoral and personal encounters. Each narrative is included with the informed consent of the individuals involved, all of whom have reviewed and approved the final manuscript text. Pseudonyms are used and identifying details have been altered to ensure their confidentiality.

often tempted to view healing as a straightforward remedy, a clear resolution to the pain that suffering brings. However, this perspective oversimplifies the intricate and layered reality of healing. Healing is not simply the absence of suffering; it is a dynamic process that unfolds in different ways, depending on individual circumstances, the communities in which we live, and the broader cultural and spiritual frameworks that shape us.

Deborah's story shows this complexity. Growing up in a military family, she seemed destined for a life of service—as a military chaplain and wife, devoted to guiding others through life's challenges. When her husband unexpectedly asked for a divorce, she was thrown into a profound personal crisis. What she learned in the aftermath, however, was that healing did not mean mending the marriage and resolving problems to return to the life she had known. Instead, it meant creating space for a new future, for new ways of being whole, even without the pieces she had once held so tightly. This realization can challenge our conventional view of healing as something that simply restores what was lost. It points to a deeper, more nuanced understanding: healing creates space for transformation and new possibilities, even amid profound loss.

In this chapter, I will explore the multifaceted nature of healing, drawing attention to the various ways it is understood across disciplines and lived experiences. Much like suffering, healing cannot be reduced to a single narrative or framework. It is not linear, nor does it always bring us back to where we started. Instead, healing is a dynamic, ongoing process—one that involves biological, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions, and that can look vastly different depending on the individual and the context. Through this exploration, I aim to offer three basic understandings to provide a

complex, holistic understanding of healing—resisting oversimplification and inviting us to see healing as a rich and transformative journey.

Defining Healing

Just as suffering resists a single definition, so too does healing, raising profound questions. Is healing understood as the complete cure or eradication of physical injury or illness? Or is it about helping a person feel whole, irrespective of their physical, mental, or emotional condition? Is it simply a process where we learn to live with what happens to us? Does healing encompass the process of safeguarding an injury from further harm, allowing natural recovery over time? Can it happen simply through belief, with or without external intervention? As with suffering, healing is not a one-size-fits-all concept—it is a deeply personal, multifaceted process that extends beyond the body to include emotional, mental, and relational dimensions. It is shaped by individual experiences and influenced by a broad spectrum of factors—physical, emotional, social, and contextual.

Biological and Relational

Modern medicine understands healing through a biological framework. The *American Journal of Physiology* characterizes it as "a physiological response to injury, wherein the body initiates cellular repair mechanisms."[2] Within the medical field itself, however, perspectives can vary. Thomas Egnew, an independent researcher and clinical social worker, collaborated with physicians to investigate diverse interpretations of

[2] Klaus Ley, "Healing without Inflammation?," *American Journal of Physiology-Regulatory, Integrative and Comparative Physiology* 285, no. 4 (2003): R718–19, https://doi.org/10.1152/ajpregu.00318.2003.

healing that they categorized into themes of wholeness, narrative, and spirituality.[3] Egnew's findings illustrate that healing, even in medicine, is a multidimensional concept rather than a single biological process.

Just as suffering is more wholly understood when we look outside Western perspectives, healing is also understood and practiced differently across cultures. We frequently hear more about this in relation to Eastern or Indigenous traditions. These traditions often include communal and spiritual practices that, while different from the individual-focused, biological approach of Western medicine, offer valuable perspectives on healing and well-being. In traditional Chinese medicine, for example, healing is considered the restoration of balance within the body's energy system, or *Qi*, which flows through the body's meridians. An imbalance in *Qi* is thought to cause disease, and healing aims to restore harmony.[4] While the Western model concentrates on individual recovery through biological mechanisms, other cultural approaches to healing embrace a more holistic view, intertwining community, spirituality, and the natural world.

Healing does not come simply from having relationships with others, but through the loving and caring actions that occur within them. Empathy, support, and shared stories create space for individuals to process suffering and find a path toward recovery. Deborah's journey is a powerful example of this dynamic. Amid the painful end of her marriage, it was the empathetic presence of her friends, mentors, and counselors that allowed her to begin reimagining her life. Their support helped her navigate her grief, not

[3] T. R. Egnew, "The Meaning Of Healing: Transcending Suffering," *The Annals of Family Medicine* 3, no. 3 (2005): 255–62, https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.313.
[4] Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine* (Contemporary Books, 2000), 34–35.

by fixing the situation, but by offering her space to heal in the context of shared understanding and care.

Arthur Kleinman's research was forward-thinking for its time, reflecting ideas that have since gained prominence in medical practice and theory. Kleinman asserted that healing is not solely an individual endeavor but is deeply interwoven with a person's social environment. He highlighted that healing unfolds within relationships—whether with caregivers, family, or broader community networks—and underscores that suffering is never experienced in isolation. He said, "The experience of illness is rooted not in individual suffering alone but in the social experience and social meaning constructed within the communities in which people live."[5] This relational perspective presaged contemporary understandings of patient-centered care and the biopsychosocial model of health.[6] It also aligns with ancestral healing practices, where communal support, shared stories, and empathetic presence play a crucial role in enhancing treatment. The meaning created within these relational actions not only aids in navigating suffering but also offers a deeper, more holistic understanding of healing.

Relational frameworks provide meaning and foster a sense of connection, helping a person move from suffering toward healing. One key concept in relational healing is "bearing witness"—a term often used in church or spiritual contexts, but which here refers not only to seeing and acknowledging someone else's suffering but also to offering a trustful, faithful presence alongside them. It is not simply about being present in a moment but actively engaging with their experience over time, validating their pain, and

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[5] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (Basic Books, 1988), 3.
[6] George L. Engel, "The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine," *Science* 196, no. 4286 (1977): 129–36, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.847460.

journeying with them through it. Through the exchange of stories, the offering of empathy, and the consistent presence of someone who listens and cares, healing can begin to take root. When others bear witness in this deeper, relational way, recovery becomes not only possible but profoundly enhanced.

Brené Brown, in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, emphasizes that emotional healing depends on positive relationships—not because simply having relationships heals, but because true healing requires individuals to feel seen, understood, and supported. Brown asserts, "Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience."[7] By acknowledging the emotions embedded in pain, we validate the person's experience and create space for healing. Brown further explains that vulnerability and openness in relationships provide the safety and emotional resilience necessary to overcome pain: "When we share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive." Thus, healing grows not from isolation, but from connection and our sharing of our lives with other people.

These experts emphasize that healing is not merely about alleviating suffering but about finding meaning in pain through deep connections with others. For Kleinman and Brown, relational networks are vital in fostering healing, as they provide the support, safety, and space needed for individuals to process their suffering and make sense of their experience. This is further supported by research in clinical settings, which demonstrates that compassionate, empathetic relationships between patients and healthcare providers significantly enhance the healing process.

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[7] C. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Hazelden, 2010), 38.

The relational aspect of healing is not simply an add-on or a helpful extra; it is foundational. Deborah's story exemplifies this truth. When her marriage ended unexpectedly, she found herself navigating profound grief because of the loss of a relationship, not in isolation, but within a community that held space for her pain. Ironically, relationships with others helped facilitate healing from the pain of a broken relationship with her husband. She later described the experience as realizing that healing was not about restoring what was lost but about creating space for what was yet to come, but her marriage had to die. Without genuine human connection and the recognition of suffering through the lens of empathy and understanding, healing cannot unfold fully. It is in these shared, supportive spaces that the transformation from suffering to healing takes place.

Theological

Healing from a theological perspective is multifaceted, encompassing the physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of life. It reflects God's intention for humanity to experience *shalom*—completeness, peace, and flourishing in relationship with God, others, creation, and oneself. This vision, however, is intricately tied to the reality of suffering. Rather than denying suffering, theological healing seeks to redeem it, drawing deeply on the interplay between crucifixion and resurrection, which lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

Early Christian thinkers understood healing in terms of a deep, transformative relationship with God, where suffering and healing coexist as part of the Christian

journey. Blaise Pascal proposed that "the only true sadness is to not be a saint,"[8] indicating that healing is found through embracing God amid suffering and turning toward spiritual growth. Mystic Julian of Norwich offered a perspective of healing intertwined with God's love. Her famous words, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well,"[9] express healing as a holistic restoration of the soul and spirit, grounded in the assurance of God's mercy and a call to trust in divine care amidst suffering. These early Christian thinkers shared a vision of healing that embraced suffering as a means of drawing closer to God, not by removing pain, but through an enduring hope and a restoration of a relationship with the divine.

Similar to suffering, the concept of healing in Christian theology has evolved over time, shaped by early theologians who offered distinct perspectives on the understanding of divine restoration. Martin Luther emphasizes reconciliation with God and the forgiveness of sins as the true source of healing, stating, "In Christ's suffering, we are made whole—physically and spiritually—not by alleviating our pain but by reclaiming our soul from eternal damnation."[10] In contrast, John Wesley presents a slightly more integrated view, acknowledging both physical and spiritual healing through God's grace: "God does not desire us to suffer physically, but His grace can work through our suffering, healing both body and soul."[11] While all three theologians prioritize spiritual healing, Wesley uniquely affirms that divine grace extends to physical well-being as well.

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[8] Blaise Pascal and A. J. Krailsheimer, *Pensées*, Rev. ed, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books; Penguin Books USA, 1995), 133.
[9] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Unabridged, contemporary English ed (Paraclete Press, 2011), 97.
[10] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535: Chap. 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Concordia Publ. House u.a, 1963), 154.
[11] John Wesley et al., *The Works of John Wesley*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Abingdon Press, 1984), 321.

In the twentieth century, Paul Tillich introduced an existential perspective on healing, framing it as the restoration of one's being in the face of suffering and alienation. For Tillich, healing is not the erasing of suffering but the courage to live one's existence despite it. He emphasized that true healing occurs when individuals confront their suffering, integrate it into their lives, and find meaning through their relationship with God. As he states, "Healing is the courage to be whole, the strength to face existential anxiety, and the wisdom to accept that through suffering and alienation, we are reconciled with God."[12] By grounding healing in the concept of being itself, Tillich shifts the focus from the physical or even purely spiritual restoration to an existential wholeness that reconciles individuals with their deepest reality. If we allow them, his insights lay the groundwork for further exploration of healing in the experiences of marginalized communities and contemporary theological thought.

Theologians speaking from the perspectives of the marginalized invite us to reimagine healing in even broader and more transformative ways, incorporating personal, collective, and societal dimensions of the healing process. For example, queer theologian Robert E. Goss emphasizes that healing for queer Christians arises not from conforming to heteronormative ideals, but through the reclamation of one's identity and the embrace of love as an inclusive grace. Goss asserts, "For the queer Christian, healing comes in the reclamation of self from the exclusions of Christian hegemony. It comes not as erasure of sexual or gender difference but in the embrace of love as an inclusive and transformative grace."[13] His theology invites a radical, liberating approach that sees healing as both a personal and societal reclamation of self.

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[12] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 2nd ed, Yale Nota Bene (Yale University Press, 2000), 131.
[13] Robert Goss, ed., *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Resource Publications, 2006), 87.

Likewise, Black liberation theologians, such as Rev. Dr. James H. Cone, argue that healing is inseparable from justice, and that true healing for Black communities must confront the trauma and suffering caused by systemic racism. Cone proclaims, "The cross of Christ is not only for personal salvation but for the healing of a broken world."[14] Cone's understanding emphasizes that healing cannot be separated from the fight for justice and equality. Feminist and womanist theology emphasizes the importance of dismantling oppressive structures to heal communities, particularly women. Elizabeth Johnson, a leading feminist theologian, asserts, "Healing includes the healing of society's structures of oppression that disempower, silence, and harm women."[15] These marginalized voices illuminate the multifaceted nature of healing as both a personal and communal process, and suggest that true healing addresses not only individuals' wounds but the societal structures that sustain oppression and inequality.

Proposing Three Understandings of Healing: The Restoration Approach

As we can see, healing is a nuanced, multidimensional process that resists simple categorization. As we move forward toward understanding how healing operates within the broader journey from suffering to thriving, I suggest three general conceptual frameworks: healing as restoration, healing through death, and healing that leaves a scar. While these categories cannot fully capture the depth of each individual experience, they offer a way to navigate the varied and often paradoxical nature of healing itself.

[14] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2013), 55.
[15] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1992), 111.

The first understanding of healing, which I call the restoration approach, aligns closely with the medical model, emphasizing physical recovery and a return to a pre-injury state. This perspective is intuitive—when a toddler scrapes their knee, the body repairs the wound and heals with no lasting effect. In this view, healing is the process of erasing evidence of harm, restoring what was lost, and leaving no lasting trace. This model dominates cultural thought of healing, offering comfort in its simplicity and resolution, particularly when addressing physical wounds. It reflects a deep human desire for closure—the reassurance that pain is temporary and that brokenness can always be undone. However, while this framework may function well in the realm of biological healing, it becomes far more complicated when applied to emotional and spiritual wounds. Unlike a scraped knee, grief, trauma, or loss do not simply disappear with time; they leave marks that shape a person's identity. In these cases, the expectation of full restoration to a previous state of being can be unrealistic, even harmful, as it may deny the reality that some wounds change us permanently.

In Deborah's story, her initial reaction to the divorce—an event that shattered her sense of stability and future—might make us expect healing to look like a restoration of her previous life: counseling, working through conflicts with her husband, and returning to the life they had imagined together. If healing were understood solely through this restoration approach, we would hope to "restore" Deborah to her pre-divorce life—a life she was forced to relinquish. Yet real life is rarely so neat. Every experience, even painful ones like divorce, adds to our histories and changes us, often in ways that are messy, unpredictable, and irreversible. Healing does not mean undoing the separation or fully recovering what was lost; instead, it involves navigating grief, anger, and disorientation

while gradually discovering how to live in a new reality that incorporates what has been lost but also opens a space for growth and new possibilities.

At first glance, Deborah sought marital reconciliation as her path forward, reflecting a restoration model of healing—the hope that what was broken could be repaired and life could return to its previous state. However, her journey reveals the limitations of this approach. Though the restoration model offers hope, it does not always align with the realities of life, particularly in the context of profound suffering. In Deborah's case, restoring the marriage was no longer possible. Instead, healing came through her ability to forge a new sense of purpose and identity amid the profound loss—the death of the life and relationship she had once imagined. The desire for complete restoration—the expectation of returning to the way things were before the trauma—was no longer realistic. Deborah's healing process became one of death and resurrection, showing that true healing does not always mean recovering what was lost, but creating something new in its place.

In Christian theology, the restoration approach to healing is deeply rooted in biblical narratives and resonates with the human longing for renewal. Throughout Scripture, God is portrayed as one who restores what is broken—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The healing miracles of Jesus, such as giving sight to the blind,[16] enabling the lame to walk,[17] and cleansing lepers,[18] not only demonstrate divine power but also affirm that God's desire is to restore individuals. These acts of healing are more than isolated moments of mercy; they signal the larger hope of renewal found in God's

[16] John 9:1-12; Matthew 9:27-31; Mark 8:22-26.
[17] Mark 2:1-12; John 5:1-9.
[18] Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 17:11-19; Mark 1:40-45.

redemptive work. This ideal vision culminates in Revelation: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."[19] The promise of ultimate restoration, where suffering is erased and creation is made new, makes this understanding of healing both deeply compelling and theologically significant.

Biblical scholars affirm that healing in this sense is not merely about physical recovery but about God's faithfulness to restore. N.T. Wright argues that biblical healing is best understood as "God's kingdom breaking into the present world, offering glimpses of the full restoration to come."[20] He emphasizes that these moments of healing—both in Scripture and today—are signs pointing toward the greater reality of God's renewal. Walter Brueggemann similarly describes biblical healing as an expression of *shalom*, which he defines as "the reestablishment of right relationships, where disorder is replaced by wholeness."[21] Healing in this view is not simply an individual experience but a communal and even cosmic restoration, bringing people and creation back into harmony with God's purposes. The restoration model of healing, then, is a valid and deeply meaningful spiritual framework. It speaks to the hope that God is actively working to mend what is broken, both in individual lives and in the world.

Despite the optimistic vision of healing, a closer look might show us that complete restoration may not be a fair expectation in every situation. While we long for healing to return us to our pre-suffering state, this is not always the experience of all

[19] Revelation 21:4.
[20] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed (HarperOne, 2008), 272.
[21] Walter Brueggemann and Walter Brueggemann, *Peace*, Understanding Biblical Themes (Chalice Press, 2001), 14.

suffering—of those who face chronic illness, trauma, or the brokenness of relationships. In fact, from a biological standpoint, complete restoration may not even be possible. Our cells continuously form and adapt, but healing is often imperfect—scar tissue may form around an injury, and the body retains memories of trauma in ways that can affect future well-being. In these situations, healing may not mirror the full physical recovery we expect. Instead, healing may look different, and the hope for a return to physical function can sometimes lead to disillusionment when it is not realized. Healing, as God's work in the world, can manifest in ways that go beyond mere physical restoration. For example, the healing of the soul, the restoration of relationships, and the transformation of character may not leave visible scars, but they are just as important in the Christian understanding of restoration.

While restoration offers a meaningful and hopeful vision of God's transformative power, it is essential to broaden our understanding. Healing is not always about being "made whole" in a physical sense. Instead, God's healing work often touches deeper dimensions of the human experience—our minds, spirits, and relationships—reminding us that the process of healing is multifaceted and can occur in different forms. Healing, therefore, can be understood as an ongoing process of growth and transformation, while we may still experience suffering, rather than a full return to the way things were before suffering occurred.

Healing Through Death

While death is the inevitable end of life, it can also be understood as a form of healing in certain contexts. Across religious, philosophical, and secular traditions, death

is often viewed not merely as an end but as a potential release from suffering, offering peace to both the dying and those left behind. Scholars in palliative care and medical ethics have explored this process in depth. Govert den Hartogh, a professor of medical ethics at VU University Amsterdam, emphasizes that a "good death allows for the relief of suffering and the opportunity for emotional and spiritual closure."[22] Yet, I remain uncertain about framing death as a form of closure, particularly given my own experiences of suffering connected to loss and grief. Bruce Bartlow, a bioethicist and contributor to the *AMA Journal of Ethics*, observes that approaching death can provide "a unique opportunity for reflection, reconciliation, and the integration of life's experiences."[23] These perspectives highlight that while beliefs about the afterlife and the presence of suffering vary widely, many approaches see death as a transition that can ease the burdens of pain and struggle.

The Christian theological perspective aligns with this view, emphasizing that death can be a form of healing. St. Augustine, in his *City of God*, speaks of death not as destruction but relief, as a passage from a corruptible life to an eternal, incorruptible life. He reflects, "For to the righteous, death is not a destruction, but a passage from a corruptible life to an eternal and incorruptible life."[24] This aligns with the Christian understanding of death as a final step in the healing process, where suffering due to sin and human imperfection is removed. Augustine's view echoes a broader theological understanding: death as a cure for the human condition, where the soul is liberated from

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[22] Govert Den Hartogh, "Suffering and Dying Well: On the Proper Aim of Palliative Care," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2017): 413. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-017-9764-3.
[23] "Healing at the End of Life," *AMA Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 5 (2001), https://doi.org/10.1001/virtualmentor.2001.3.5.elce1-0105.
[24] St Augustine, *The City of God*, with Marcus Dods (Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 13.3.

the pain and brokenness of earthly life. Biblically, death is portrayed both as a release and a transformation. Jesus's raising of Lazarus in John 11 provides a powerful example: Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus, yet he later calls him out of the tomb, demonstrating that through death—followed by resurrection—healing is realized.

While the Christian view underscores death as a necessary part of the healing journey, even nonreligious individuals recognize death as a relief from suffering. Secular thinkers and medical professionals often view death as a merciful end to prolonged suffering, particularly in cases of terminal illness. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the field of thanatology (the study of death and dying), emphasizes in her landmark book *On Death and Dying* that for many individuals, especially those facing terminal illness, death is often perceived as a release from pain. She writes, "The dying person's sense of peace often comes from the belief that they will soon be free of the suffering that has defined their final days."[25] This perspective aligns with the natural human desire for peace and resolution, acknowledging that death, in many cases, represents the cessation of an individual's suffering.

Additionally, the work of Dr. Atul Gawande, a board-certified surgeon and public health researcher, particularly in *Being Mortal*, emphasizes the importance of end-of-life care that prioritizes quality of life over aggressive medical interventions. Gawande argues that, rather than striving to prolong life at all costs, patients and families should focus on alleviating suffering and making the most of the remaining time. As he notes, "The truth is that for the vast majority of us, we will live with our illnesses for years, and when

[25] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Ira Byock, *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy & Their Own Families*, 50th anniversary edition (Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2019), 6.

death does come, it will be an end of suffering. But the key is to have the courage to acknowledge it and make the most of whatever time we have left."[26] This emphasis on prioritizing comfort and meaningful experiences underscores the idea that thoughtful end-of-life care can provide healing and peace for both the patient and those left behind.

In the case of Deborah, whose painful divorce mirrored the metaphorical death of a relationship, healing was not about resurrecting or restoring what had been lost but creating new space for life and love to emerge. As she described, the process of "providing hospice care for a terminally ill relationship" was a form of healing—one that recognized the necessity of letting go, allowing for a new life to unfold. For Deborah, as for those who experience the death of loved ones or the end of relationships, healing often comes through accepting that suffering—whether physical or emotional—is not permanent. Instead, healing is found in the process of release: letting go of what cannot be restored and making space for transformation to unfold.

Healing That Leaves a Scar

After exploring healing through complete restoration and death, we arrive at a third understanding of healing—the kind that leaves a scar. Unlike complete restoration, this form of healing does not erase the signs of injury or illness; instead, it offers a new way of living with and through the marks left behind. Whether physical, mental, or emotional, this healing involves adaptation and transformation. Physical scars, like those from surgery or injury, serve as lasting evidence of the healing process. Similarly, internal injuries produce "scars" of sorts. These emotional and mental scars remind us of

[26] Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (Metropolitan Books, 2015), 143.

past suffering but also signify growth, recovery, and survival. These scars become part of our story, not as symbols of defeat but as markers of the resilience it takes to move forward. We will explore these types of scars in the next chapter. In the same way, emotional and mental healing may not return us to a "pre-suffering" state, but it transforms us, helping us navigate the future with greater resilience. Over time, the scars we carry can shift in meaning—from painful reminders of loss to symbols of strength and wisdom gained.

This understanding of healing is deeply embedded in biblical theology, exemplified in Jesus's post-resurrection appearance. After his crucifixion, Jesus appears to the disciples, still bearing the marks of his suffering. When Thomas doubts the resurrection, Jesus invites him to see and touch the marks, demonstrating that healing does not erase the realities of suffering. These marks, then, become symbols not of defeat but of the victory won through suffering. Similarly, our own scars—physical, emotional, or spiritual—testify to our capacity to endure, transform, and heal.

As trauma expert Karen McClintock points out, "Healing begins when communities create spaces where people can re-establish trust and connection."[27] This healing process, especially when it involves scars, is not one to undertake alone. It requires the support of others, who offer a place where both wounds and scars can be acknowledged and transformed. It's through these communal spaces that we not only reframe our scars but also learn to live with them in ways that bring healing—not in spite of the pain but through it. In the following chapters, we'll explore how such spaces of transformation can lead us from surviving our scars to thriving with them, inviting a

[27] Karen A. McClintock, *When Trauma Wounds: Pathways to Healing and Hope*, Living with Hope (Fortress Press, 2019), 62.

deeper understanding of healing that encompasses not just the individual but the community as well.

Summary

In this chapter, we have explored three dimensions of healing: restoration, healing through death, and healing that leaves a scar. Each represents a distinct response to suffering, offering a lens through which to understand God's work in the lives of individuals and communities. While restoration offers the hope of returning to a previous state, and death brings the cessation of pain and suffering, it is the healing that leaves a scar that invites the deepest reflection. This form of healing, like Deborah's journey, does not erase the past or restore what was lost but provides space for transformation and adaptation. Just as Deborah's experience of grief and loss led her to discover a new sense of life, this type of healing teaches us that it is often not about erasing pain but learning how to live with it. Healing is found in the willingness to confront our scars, integrate them into our journey, and allow them to shape us.

In the next chapter, we will unpack the significance of scars. Scars are the visible markers, reminders of a journey that does not conclude with a return to "before," but instead embraces a new normal, one shaped by growth, resilience, and ongoing connection. We will explore how these scars—both physical and emotional—reflect the transformative nature of healing and how they integrate into the journey from suffering to thriving.

Chapter 3: Transformation, Healing, and Identity

"Please do not do it, Mommy." The pleading screams of her two-year-old son still echo in Hannah's mind years later—his desperate words as she prepared to administer yet another insulin injection. For Hannah, this was a daily routine, requiring at least two adults to hold down his tiny body. When she talks about her children's medical concerns, she often does so with pride and genuine awe for how they navigate challenges. But when she tells this story, something shifts. Her voice falters, her eyes glaze, and it becomes clear: this is like an emotional scar on her heart. In the memory of hurting her own child to save him, a wound was left—not on her body, but deep within. It does not bleed or bruise, but it resurfaces, silently, without warning, and sometimes others can see it. Hannah does not share this story often, but when she does, it reveals a pain that still lingers. Her invisible scar exists alongside resilience, humor, and faith, all woven into the complex tapestry of who she has become.

Introduction: Marks of Suffering, Marks of Healing

Culturally, scars are often seen as markers of suffering, linked to injuries, surgeries, or illness. These marks are frequently viewed with shame—as blemishes, imperfections on our skin that need to be hidden or erased. Some people turn to creams, surgeries, or social concealment, covering them in public spaces to maintain an image of an unblemished, scarless body. This cultural mindset reinforces the idea that scars are undesirable remnants of pain and vulnerability to be obscured, rather than acknowledged or embraced. Instead of celebrating scars as symbols of resilience, society urges us to hide them, fostering a narrative where healing connects not to relief from suffering or injury, but to the removal of visible evidence that pain ever occurred.

When we think of scars, our instinct is often to picture them on the body. A physical scar typically signals that a wound has closed: the pain has subsided, and what

remains is a visible mark without lasting harm. In most cases, the scar functions less as an injury than as a reminder, evidence of healing rather than continuing damage. Yet scars are not confined to the body—they can form in dimensions far less visible but no less consequential. In the following, I will extend the language of "internal scars" to include the metaphorical representation of emotional, spiritual, or mental effects caused by trauma, pain, injury, suffering, or significant distress. Internal scars can emerge in the memories of suffering we carry, in the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others, and in the patterns of guardedness that shape our relationships—all influencing how we interpret new experiences in light of old pain. They do not appear in tissue or on our skin, but in behavior—in the silent narratives of how we make sense of what we have endured. These internal scars, though imperceptible to the eye, are equally real.

Hannah knows both kinds of scars intimately. Her children's bodies bear the physical marks of their illness—tiny puncture scars from thousands of needle pricks, reminders of every blood test and daily insulin injection that keeps them alive. But when she tells the story of holding down her youngest child, I see her internal scars show. When Hannah recounts that story, she is transported back to that moment; the anguish of the past resurfaces as if it were present, reverberating through her own body and consciousness. In this way, emotional scars can mirror physical wounds—they leave marks that are invisible but profoundly real, shaping how one lives and relates long after the original event.

However, these invisible scars hold another truth: they are not merely reminders of past wounds but symbols of healing itself. Just like physical scars, they can tell a story of survival, of adaptation, of moving forward even when the past still lingers on our skin

or in our hearts. Scars bear witness to both pain and transformation, marking the places where we were once broken—and where we mended, even if only just a little bit. While we may have a robust understanding of physical scars, the metaphor of internal, non-visible, and intangible scars presents an additional challenge—one that cannot be seen with the eye. These internal scars require a deeper exploration, and we will rely on different understandings of internal healing to guide us through understanding them. In this chapter, we will explore scars as markers of transformation—both the tangible ones that mark our bodies and the invisible ones that shape our inner psychological, emotional, and spiritual landscapes. We will examine the biological process of scar formation and compare it to the shaping of emotional and psychological scars that, while imperceptible, nonetheless influence how we navigate the world with suffering. We will also consider the dangers of excessive scar tissue, a metaphor focused on the imbalance of healing tissue that can cause further harm—when the very thing meant to heal becomes an affliction of its own. And finally, we will reflect on the spiritual and theological significance of scars, asking what they reveal about our identity, our faith, and our ability to live—not in spite of our wounds, but with them.

As we shift from understanding healing to exploring the nature of scars, it is essential to clarify the relationship between suffering and injury. Previously, we defined suffering as a profound and ongoing experience of pain that affects the body, mind, and/or spirit—shaped by both the intensity of the pain and the individual's response to it. Suffering manifests in various forms: emotional pain like anxiety or loneliness; physical pain from illness or injury; relational pain from betrayal or loss; and spiritual pain, such as a crisis of faith or feeling abandoned by God. Beyond individual experiences, suffering

can extend into systemic and collective realms, such as poverty, injustice, or communal grief.

However, suffering is often, though not always, precipitated by acute disruptions—specific breaks in the continuity of life that we identify as injuries. These injuries mark the beginning of suffering. A sprained ankle forces us to adjust our movements, the loss of a job can shake our sense of purpose, and a betrayal by a close friend challenges our ability to trust. The death of a loved one shifts our understanding of life itself, while a broken family dynamic may create lasting emotional ripples. For our purposes, it's important to distinguish injury from suffering, even as we recognize their interconnectedness. While suffering encompasses the broader experience of pain, injury refers more specifically to the event or wound that triggers it. These injuries—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—are the catalysts, the events sometimes followed by suffering, that leave scars, visible or invisible, serving as enduring reminders of our vulnerabilities and resilience.

Understanding the relationship between injury and suffering sets the stage for examining how scars not only signify past wounds but can contribute to our ongoing journey of healing, living, and the possibility of thriving. Judith Herman, a leading expert on trauma at Harvard Medical School, puts it differently in her study of trauma recovery, stating, "Trauma is a wound to the spirit. It leaves its mark and, in the healing process, the scar forms not only as evidence of injury but also as a testimony to survival."[1] Herman's insight underscores the deep relationship between suffering and injury, where the wound—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—becomes a crucial moment in the

[1] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (BasicBooks, 2003), 35.

journey of healing, but it leaves a mark. Just as physical injury leads to a scar that marks the path of recovery, emotional and spiritual wounds leave marks signifying healing that hold significant meaning in the broader context of healing and growth. While I agree with Herman's reflection, I also hold that not every painful experience must be labeled as traumatic to leave a lasting impact. The language and diagnosis of trauma rightly belong to the realm of clinical expertise. Yet the suffering we endure—whatever form it takes—often leaves its own imprint on our hearts, minds, and souls. I know this not only from my own experience, but also through my vocation as a pastor and the sacred privilege of walking alongside others as a friend. Whether or not such pain meets a diagnostic threshold, it still leaves marks that shape us. Over time, these marks may become part of how we grow, adapt, and ultimately heal.

Internal Scars: Injury and Transformation

When the body is physically injured, it initiates a coordinated healing process aimed at restoring function and automatically protecting the affected area, forming scar tissue. While scar tissue is stronger than the original tissue, it is less flexible, which can restrict movement, especially in areas like joints. Ultimately, scar formation serves a protective function, reinforcing the injured area to prevent further damage.[2] However, this increased strength often comes at the expense of flexibility, creating challenges, particularly in areas requiring mobility, such as burn injuries.[3]

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[2] Allison Cowin, *Wound Repair and Regeneration* (MDPI - Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2018).

[3] Mohammed T. A. Omar et al., "Lower-Limb Muscular Strength, Balance, and Mobility Levels in Adults Following Severe Thermal Burn Injuries:," *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 38, no. 5 (2017): 327–33, https://doi.org/10.1097/BCR.0000000000000495.

Just as the body forms scar tissue in response to physical injury, the human mind and emotions develop internal scars—psychological, emotional, and spiritual—following both physical and emotional injury. While the biological healing process of physical wounds is widely understood and observable, these responses to internal injuries—though more complex and abstract—similarly lead to lasting changes in the brain and emotional health.

These emotional injuries, like physical wounds, can leave lasting marks in the form of persistent emotional patterns that endure long after the initial event. In Hannah's case, the intense stress of caring for her son during his early medical struggles shaped her emotional responses. The vivid memory of his cries and pleas during insulin injections fostered a heightened sense of vigilance and anxiety—patterns that mirror, on a neurological level, the way the brain responds to prolonged stress. Yet she is not frozen; her mind, having adapted to these challenges, developed new neural pathways that help her manage the ongoing complexities of her children's health. In this way, Hannah's experience illustrates how high-stress events can leave lasting "scars" on our emotional lives, shaping our responses without defining our capacity to adapt and cope.

Limitations of the Scar Metaphor

While physical scars serve as a protective mechanism and facilitate healing, my metaphorical application of internal scars to emotional, spiritual, or psychological injury has significant conceptual limitations. Unlike biological scarring, where tissue forms through an automatic, visible, and structured healing pathway, internal scars remain invisible, follow no defined healing process, and potentially never manifest in observable

ways. As cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, "metaphors can shape our understanding of complex phenomena,"[4] but the scar metaphor ultimately fails to fully capture the complexity of psychological wounds in several critical dimensions.

The first limitation concerns tangibility. In the case of physical scars, healing follows observable stages—hemostasis, inflammation, proliferation, and remodeling—with the final scar providing a concrete sign of the body's resilience. As Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist specializing in trauma and its effects on the body, emphasizes, "physical injuries . . . heal in a relatively straightforward way," whereas emotional or psychological scars "are not always clear or easily measurable." [5] While internal wounds might notionally have evidence that they "heal," the scars left behind often lack this same perceptibility or concrete evidence, challenging the metaphor's applicability.

A second limitation involves complexity and variability. Judith Herman notes that "emotional wounds are less visible, harder to define, and more subject to the influence of external and internal factors,"[6] which fundamentally complicates the application of the scar metaphor in psychological contexts. While emotional scars may "form" over time, similar to physical scars, the psychological healing process is far from linear, and there might be no external sign of the injury's existence. Herman further explains, "healing from trauma involves not only physical recovery but also emotional, psychological, and social restoration."[7] Her observation highlights the multidimensional nature of emotional healing. This complexity also reveals a limitation of the scar metaphor: it may not fully

[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 6. print (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.
[5] Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015), 45.
[6] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (BasicBooks, 2003), 25.
[7] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 44.

capture the diverse personal, social, and psychological factors that shape recovery, nor the intentional efforts individuals make to facilitate their own healing. In these cases, psychological scars might not signify the automatic closure or resolution as they seem to in biological healing.

The third limitation concerns temporality and function. The limits of the metaphor become especially apparent when considering that internal scars rarely follow the clear, structured healing of their physical counterparts. As Van der Kolk explains, "psychological trauma often leaves lasting imprints that require ongoing healing efforts,"[8] suggesting that emotional healing may take longer or demand entirely different restorative mechanisms that are not automatic. This distinction is critical for understanding the nuances of emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing, where the metaphorical "scars" may not offer the same protective function or sense of definitive closure that biological scars can provide. Instead, internal wounds may continue to require active management and attention long after the initial injury, challenging the very conceptual foundation of what constitutes a "scar" in emotional contexts.

Emotional Scar Formation

Like physical scars, internal scars are formed as the psyche attempts to protect itself from further harm. These metaphorical psychological, spiritual, and emotional scars can provide protection, but they may also limit the individual's capacity for healing and adaptability over time. Bessel van der Kolk underscores the body's central role in the healing process, stating, "The body keeps the score . . . how we store trauma and the

[8] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 25.

experience of trauma within us both physically and emotionally."[9] Maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as emotional suppression, often compound distress, prevent an individual from moving forward. These patterns, driven by unresolved emotional scars, make it more difficult to adapt to new situations and emotional experiences, leading to a cycle of suffering.

Healing from internal injury involves integrating the experience into one's self-concept and daily existence. As Dr. Judith Herman states, "The goal of trauma recovery is to help the victim reconstruct their sense of self and restore their ability to be a full participant in life."[10] This reconstruction involves the protective responses that have been formed but also fostering the resilience needed to overcome the limitations imposed by those very protections. In this sense, healing from trauma, like healing from a physical injury, requires both a return to normal functioning and a reformation of the self-concept.

When emotional injuries do not get the care they need, they can compound. It is like a wound that does not heal properly—it stiffens, tightens, and over time, it can start to restrict your movement. Bruce Perry puts it this way: "Emotional wounds are an inevitable part of being human, and unhealed, they can restrict personal growth and impair the ability to have healthy, functional relationships."[11] That rings true. We all carry wounds, but if we never go back to tend to them, we end up building our lives around them. Healing means gently returning to those injured places—acknowledging them, learning how our coping patterns formed, and slowly making space for something

[9] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 33.
[10] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 23.
[11] Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook; What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us about Loss, Love, and Healing* (Basic Books, 2008), 78.

new. With the help of good research and grounded practices, we can begin to soften the excess scar tissue, opening the way for growth, deeper relationships, and a more honest kind of wholeness.

Excessive emotional, psychological, or spiritual scars can restrict one's ability to move forward. Just like physical scar tissue, which can cause pain or limit flexibility, internal scar tissue can lock a person into unhealed patterns. Researcher Aaron T. Beck, a prominent psychologist specializing in emotional regulation, emphasizes that maladaptive strategies, often compound distress rather than relieve it. Beck states, "The identification of faulty or maladaptive thought patterns is essential to effective psychological treatment. These patterns, which stem from deeply ingrained beliefs, often perpetuate emotional suffering and prevent growth."[12] His work highlights how these coping strategies can reinforce emotional pain, leading to psychological symptoms such as persistent anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders, while also preventing individuals from confronting and processing the root causes of their distress.

Just as physical scar tissue requires medical intervention to alleviate discomfort and restore function, emotional scar tissue demands therapeutic support, reflection, and active engagement to heal. Emotional injuries, particularly those that have become entrenched in protective patterns, require intentional effort to break free from harmful behaviors and responses. Therapy provides a safe and structured space for individuals to unearth the roots of their internal scars, process painful experiences, and challenge the patterns formed as defenses against trauma. This involves addressing not just surface symptoms—such as anxiety, avoidance, or emotional numbing—but also the underlying

[12] Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1979), 52.

causes of the emotional injury. Confronting these deep-seated patterns is essential to releasing the grip of emotional scar tissue and restoring flexibility, growth, and the ability to thrive.

However, just like physical scars can remind us of what we have survived, emotional scars, once attended to through professional care can become a source of strength. Research on post-traumatic growth shows that some people, after walking through deep pain, come out with a clearer sense of purpose, stronger relationships, and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. In that way, the scar itself becomes part of the story—not just of what hurt, but of what has healed. Psychologist John C. Mayer's work on emotional intelligence shows that when we suppress emotions instead of working through them, it's like the body healing the wrong way after an injury—what was meant to protect us ends up restricting us.[13] We lose flexibility, and it gets harder to process new experiences or respond with openness. So, while some scars help tell the story of resilience, too much internal buildup can make healing harder. It is a reminder that tending to our wounds—with honesty, care, and support—is what allows us to grow, not just survive.

The Spiritual and Theological Significance of Scars

Scars—whether physical or internal—are real and personal marks of our journey, reflecting both our suffering and growth. They are unique to each individual, telling the story of the trials we have faced and the healing we have experienced. Scripture has something to show us about this as well. Just as Jesus's resurrection scars serve as

[13] Peter Salovey, ed., *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovey Model* (Dude Publishing, 2007), 105.

powerful symbols of victory over death and suffering, our own scars reflect the injury and suffering we have endured and the transformative process that can lead to healing. Henri Nouwen's concept of *The Wounded Healer* helps us understand that scars are not signs of weakness, but symbols of profound vulnerability and strength. As Nouwen writes, "The Christian leader is called to be a wounded healer, to transform personal pain into a source of healing for others."[14] This calling, though traditionally associated with the clergy, is not limited to any single role. Every Christian—through their scars, healing, and story—shares in this leadership, using their own journey of suffering and redemption to guide others.

Nouwen also writes, "The wounded healer is someone who does not offer a perfect cure, but the gift of human compassion, borne out of one's own scars." This aligns with the idea that healing does not remove scars but rather incorporates them into the ongoing story of restoration and transformation. Our scars remain present, reminding us not only of the suffering we endured but also of how God has used those experiences to bring about growth, healing, and a greater capacity to support others in their struggles. This idea is closely tied to the resurrection of Christ, where the scars left by the crucifixion do not represent defeat, but the victory over sin and death.

Healing and the experience of pain are deeply personal, and as Jürgen Moltmann suggests, healing is rarely a linear process. Scars serve different purposes for each individual, and though they may sometimes cause discomfort when touched, that discomfort should not be viewed as a sign of weakness. Instead, it offers a powerful invitation to reflect on the journey of suffering and healing. Moltmann's theology of

[14] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (The Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 82.

suffering emphasizes that scars—both personal and communal—hold intrinsic value because they participate in a larger redemptive process. He writes, "The pain and the scars of the past do not vanish into nothingness, but they make a new future possible, one that is filled with hope and transformation."[15] This aligns with the Christian belief in a God who can use suffering as a means of redemption, transforming what was once painful into something that leads to future hope and new life.

Scars, while reminders of past pain, might not exist simply to hold us captive in suffering. While they can cause discomfort when revisited, they could also invite us into a deeper reflection on our journey rather than bind us to the past. In the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, one might see his wounds not as signs of defeat, but as symbols of healing, transformation, and the power of God's redemption. Just as Jesus reveals his scars to his disciples with a sense of victory rather than shame, perhaps we are invited to engage with our own scars with honesty—recognizing that they mark not only pain but healing as well.

Dr. Wilda Gafney, in her reflections on healing and the body in *Womanist Midrash*, offers a compelling insight into how scars can serve as powerful symbols of survival and transformation. She writes, "The scars we bear tell the truth of our survival, and they also tell the story of our resilience. The gospel's message of healing and wholeness doesn't ask us to forget our scars; it calls us to honor them as part of the journey toward restoration."[16] Gafney's perspective invites us to view many of our scars

[15] Douglas Koskela, "Remembering the Future: Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope," *Response: Seattle Pacific University*, n.d., https://spu.edu/depts/uc/response/spring2k8/features/moltmann.asp.
[16] Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Presbyterian Publishing, 2017), 190.

as markers of both suffering and resilience, and she challenges us to embrace them as part of the sacred narrative of healing.

Alongside Gafney's insights, Elizabeth Johnson in *Quest for the Living God* underscores the importance of recognizing suffering and scars as part of the divine transformation. She writes, "The experience of suffering is not a break in the divine plan but a point where God's grace enters, shaping the future with the resilience and wisdom born from pain."[17] For Johnson, the scars we bear are not mere remnants of a fallen world but essential aspects of the redemptive journey, where God's grace becomes tangible in the spaces of brokenness. She highlights that embracing suffering can open us to deeper encounters with God's transformative love and healing power. The scars we bear, therefore, may recount the past, but they also speak to our ongoing transformation as individuals and as part of a community.

A Communal and Personal Witness

The scars we bear become powerful signs of what God can redeem and transform. As we share our stories—whether in the church, with family, especially enhanced by intimate moments of vulnerability—our scars serve as testimonies to the resilience of the human spirit and the work of God in our lives. As James Cone, a profound theologian in the Black liberation tradition, writes, "The cross and the scars of Jesus are not just symbols of suffering but of a radically new beginning where the past no longer controls the future."[18] Christ's wounds, as signs of redemption, remind us that in Christ, our

[17] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, Paperback ed (Continuum, 2011), 120.
[18] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2013), 182.

sufferings are never without meaning. Our scars are not merely markers of past pain; they are proof that we can live through suffering and emerge stronger, continuing to heal and grow.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "Who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."[19] These words echo the transformative power of suffering shared in community. Our scars, once signs of brokenness, become ways in which we extend God's comfort and healing to others. According to M. Shawn Copeland, in *Enfleshing Freedom*, "Suffering, when shared, becomes an instrument of communion, a sacred bond between the wounded and the healer, where the healing power of God is made manifest in the community."[20] By sharing our scars, we not only witness God's transformative grace in our lives but can also extend healing to others, creating a ripple effect of restoration and hope within our communities. As Ada María Isasi-Díaz emphasizes, "In our shared suffering and scars, we discover a communal identity that transcends individual pain, calling us to create a new community where justice and compassion reign."[21] Isasi-Díaz emphasizes the gathered community within suffering as a sacred space where solidarity is born, and where collective pain can become a catalyst for liberation, healing, and transformative action.

[19] 2 Corinthians 1:4.
[20] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Second edition (Fortress Press, 2023), 89.
[21] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha =: In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 76.

Scars also reveal an important reality: what happens to us goes with us. Our scars are proof that the pain we have experienced, the struggles we have faced, and the challenges we have overcome are now part of who we are. They do not vanish or disappear—they stay with us, becoming part of the story that continues to shape our journey, though they do not define it. In this way, scars are not simply marks of past pain or healing, but reminders that our experiences—though sometimes painful—are never wasted. They form part of who we are becoming, helping us navigate the world with a deeper understanding of suffering, resilience, and healing, even as we remain more than the sum of our scars.

Ultimately, scars are bridges—places where suffering meets healing, where God's grace seeps into our lives, and where transformation begins. Just as Hannah's ongoing journey with her family's chronic illnesses is marked by moments of pain and triumph, our own scars offer evidence of God's involvement in our lives, reminding us that transformation is always possible, no matter how deep the wound. In God's restoration and redemption, our scars become proof that healing is real and wholeness is attainable. This is not the end of our story but a crucial part of God's continual work to shape us into something new.

Summary

As we reflect on the meaning and significance of scars, it becomes clear that they need not be markers of defeat or sorrow, but powerful symbols of the healing that follows suffering. They are an integral part of our journey toward wholeness, reminding us that transformation, resilience, and God's redeeming work are at play. Scars are part of pain

and injury. They shape who we are, but they do not define us—they are part of a larger story of becoming, where suffering leads to healing, and healing moves us toward thriving. In the next chapter, we will explore what it means to live with our scars, to carry them with us, and to continue healing through our experiences. This journey toward thriving is not about forgetting the pain of suffering but about learning to live with it in such a way that it fuels a life of greater purpose, healing, and impact.

Chapter 4: The Third Type of Healing: The Journey of Suffering From to Living With

What Is the Journey?

In Chapter 1, I defined suffering as a profound and ongoing experience of pain that affects a person's body, mind, or spirit, shaped by the intensity of the pain and the individual's response to it. This pain is not merely a momentary discomfort but an interrupting force that shapes every aspect of a person's existence, its intensity compounded by how one responds to it. In Chapter 2, I also examined healing, so far identifying two common understandings: complete restoration and death. However, as we have seen, these options can feel too simplistic or unattainable for many who experience pain, injury, loss, or suffering. This chapter delves into a third type of healing—one that does not promise restoration or escape but instead proposes a third way—healing that allows us to move forward while still carrying our injuries, to live with the scars. Healing in this model is not about returning to what was but about finding a new way to live with the marks we carry. This healing journey is what I frame as the transformation of "*suffering from*" to "*living with*" our injuries. This is an approach that does not diminish the severity of our injuries. It recognizes that some wounds will never fully heal—but we can learn to live with them, adapt and continue forward, even as they leave a lasting impact. This approach best reflects my own lived experience since losing Sam and navigating what followed, as well as what I observe in my role as a pastor walking alongside others in their deepest moments of suffering. In this chapter, I will explore what it means to move from suffering from to living with what happens to us.

Suffering From and Living With

What do I mean by suffering from? In everyday language, we often describe injuries, illnesses, or losses in terms of suffering: she is suffering from a broken leg, he is suffering from depression. The phrasing of "suffering from" subtly frames the ailment, illness, or injury as the enemy—understanding it as the source of our suffering, the thing to be fought against or overcome. Our language positions the injury or condition as the culprit, defining our experience through the lens of what has harmed us. This way of speaking might also suggest that suffering is something imposed on us by an external force, something that must be eradicated or eliminated for healing to occur. When we say the human person is suffering from something, we place ourselves in a passive position, as if we are at the mercy of our pain. This can also impact the way that we might understand how that suffering is alleviated, if at all. It reinforces the idea that healing only happens when the suffering is removed—when the leg is mended, the depression lifted, or the grief resolved. Again, leaving the human person with little agency or activity to get better. In this language, the body or mind is something broken or wounded, and healing is understood as the restoration of something lost or damaged. It only recognizes the first understanding of healing, the restoration model.

While this way of speaking about "suffering from" might seem natural—and even helpful for creating a clearer narrative for both the individual and those around them—it also subtly shifts the person into the role of an object to be treated, rather than an active participant in their life, much less their own healing. Psychological and medical frameworks often reinforce this by categorizing illness as an external force acting upon

the individual. For instance, psychiatric frameworks, like those found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), diagnose individuals as "suffering from depression" or "suffering from anxiety," positioning the distress as something caused by a diagnosable condition that can be treated or cured. The language does not just describe symptoms for diagnosis; it shapes how we understand suffering itself—as a problem to be identified and solved. It offers a sense of order and certainty amid chaos, but it also limits the ways we think about healing. As medical sociologist Arthur Frank, a professor at the University of Calgary, suggests, "Illness is not a problem to be solved but an experience to be lived."[1] By framing suffering as something external to the self, this language invites a fix rather than a deeper engagement with the lived reality of pain.

This language also impacts our societal expectations and the pressure it places on those suffering to recover quickly. As Megan Devine, a licensed psychotherapist and grief expert, writes, "Society often pushes us toward the idea that grief should be 'overcome,' yet grief is a process that requires space, time, and understanding rather than immediate resolution."[2] In the months and even first year following Sam's passing, I was begging for a single day where he was not the first thing on my mind when I woke up in the morning, much less cross my mind at all during the day. When we say we are suffering from something, we internalize the belief that suffering is an affliction that must be removed or cured, rather than an experience to be understood, integrated, and lived with.

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[1] Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 36.
[2] Megan Devine, *It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* (Sounds True, 2017), 17.

Ultimately, while the language of "suffering from" provides clarity and a sense of control, it can also limit our understanding of suffering as a dynamic and integral part of human existence. By framing suffering as an external problem to be solved, we risk overlooking the possibility of growth and transformation that can emerge from facing pain directly. Instead of simply seeking to "fix" what ails us, we must consider how our experiences of suffering can deepen our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world around us. In embracing suffering as part of life's journey, we open the door to healing that is not only about restoration, but also about learning to live with what happens to us, while carrying the scars that impact us.

Over time, the way we experience and describe our pain begins to change. The journey does not end with suffering alone; rather, it moves toward a new reality. I contend that this reality can be one that acknowledges the lasting impact of our wounds while making space for life beyond them. There is language we use that naturally reflects this transition: we speak of living with a broken leg, living with depression, or living with the loss of a loved one. This shift does not mean forgetting suffering or achieving complete healing, but rather adapting to our circumstances. It is a change; our world reshapes itself around our pain, integrating it into daily life. We do not simply move on; we learn to move forward, and in some situations, we continue carrying our suffering in a way that allows us to keep living. We rely on crutches as our leg mends or seek treatment for depression.

In this third model, healing is not a singular event but a part of the journey. This journey from *suffering from* to *living with* requires more than simply enduring—it often involves a conscious choice to reflect, to recognize the potential for growth, and to

engage courageously with our struggles. Rather than letting suffering become our identity, healing invites us to confront our pain intentionally. True healing does not erase what we have endured but reshapes how we relate to it, guiding us toward a life where our wounds no longer define us.

In the Words of Others

Throughout history, theologians, philosophers, and psychologists have explored the shift from suffering to living with what happens to us in their own ways. St. John of the Cross, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, describes this journey as a necessary process of spiritual purification: "The endurance of darkness is the preparation for great light."[3] His writing acknowledges that suffering is not an endpoint but a passage toward deeper faith, reinforcing the idea that living with hardship can bring spiritual transformation rather than mere endurance.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche also points toward this transformation from *suffering from* to *living with*. In his words, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how,"[4] suggesting that the presence of meaning—not the elimination of pain—is what enables endurance and growth. Nietzsche's existential philosophy underscores the importance of embracing suffering as an inevitable part of human life, not something to be defeated, but something to be integrated.

Psychologist and cultural critic bell hooks takes this further, arguing that healing is not just about individual endurance but transforming pain into love. She writes, "Rarely,

[3] E. Allison Peers, *Dark Night of the Soul: A Masterpiece in the Literature of Mysticism by St. John of the Cross* (The Crown Publishing Group, 2005), 39.
[4] Friedrich Nietzsche and Reginald John Hollingdale, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books, 2003), 33.

if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion."[5] Her work challenges the idea that suffering is something to be fixed or hidden; instead, it is something to be engaged with in ways that cultivate connection, justice, and self-awareness. She reframes healing as a practice of love, one that requires both personal reckoning and a broader commitment to collective care. The importance of community on the journey will be discussed in the sections below.

Richard Rohr's *Falling Upward* frames this transformation within the spiritual life cycle. He asserts, "The way up is the way down. Or, if you prefer, the only way up is through the depths."[6] Rohr suggests that suffering serves as a threshold to deeper wisdom and maturity. His work affirms that living with pain is not about passive endurance but about integration, allowing hardship to shape a richer, more authentic life. Finally, Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, challenges the notion that light and certainty define spiritual health. She writes, "New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."[7] Her metaphor underscores the reality that moving from suffering to living with requires a willingness to navigate uncertainty. Living with darkness does not mean overcoming it but learning to exist within it.

Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, argues that survival depends not on the absence of suffering but on finding purpose within it. He writes, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."[8] Frankl's experiences

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[5] bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions*, Love Song to the Nation Ser, v. 1 (William Morrow, 2018), 215.
[6] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (Wiley, 2011), 12.
[7] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 13.
[8] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, with Harold S. Kushner and William J. Winslade (Beacon Press, 2006), 115.

in a concentration camp illustrate how meaning-making enables one to live with suffering—living with the pain, rather than being consumed by it. His work supports the notion that moving from suffering to living with requires a reorientation of perspective, choosing to see purpose even in our deepest struggles.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Wounded Healer*, expands on this idea, proposing that those who have suffered can, in turn, become sources of healing for others. He states, "Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we do not have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?'"[9] Nouwen shifts the focus from personal endurance to communal transformation, suggesting that living with suffering involves choosing to use it to cultivate empathy and service.

The journey of *suffering from* to *living with* is not confined to Western or Christian understanding. Across cultures and traditions, other voices offer frameworks that emphasize transformation through presence, embodiment, and communal awareness. Audre Lorde, writing from her experience as a Black lesbian poet and activist, insists that pain must be felt and named in order to be transcended: "Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it."[10] Pema Chödrön, drawing on Buddhist teachings, invites a radical acceptance of suffering, reminding us that "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."[11] Chicana cultural theorist, writer, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, known for her work on identity,

[9] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 23.
[10] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, with Cheryl Clarke (Crossing Press, 2012), 174.
[11] Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, 20th ed, Shambhala Classics Ser (Shambhala, 2000), 66.

borderlands, and spiritual activism, describes the in-between space of *nepantla*—a place of transition marked by discomfort and disorientation—as a fertile ground for transformation.[12]

Similarly, therapist and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem reminds us that healing is not just a psychological or spiritual experience but also an embodied one, rooted in our nervous systems and shaped by generational pain. He writes, "Healing involves discomfort—but so does refusing to heal. And, over time, refusing to heal is always more painful."[13] These thinkers expand our thinking beyond Western understanding of living with what happens to us by emphasizing that healing is not a return to the original state, but the emergence of a new, deeper wholeness—one that acknowledges complexity, embraces vulnerability, and honors the wisdom that pain can teach.

Examples of Suffering From to Living With

This pattern of living with what happens to us, rather than being delivered from it, is echoed throughout Scripture. Jacob wrestles with a divine figure and walks away limping—a name and a limp that together signify both his struggle and his transformation. [14] After immense suffering, Job's restoration does not erase his loss, but reflects a changed relationship with God, one marked by humility and deeper insight. [15] Similarly, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples bearing the scars of crucifixion—

[12] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (Spinsters, Aunt Lute, 1987), 100–101.
[13] Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery Press, 2017), 15.
[14] Genesis 32:24–32.
[15] Job 42.

visible evidence that his suffering was not undone but transfigured, showing that the wounds themselves testify to the transformation that has taken place. [16]

The transition from *suffering from* to *living with* is beautifully illustrated in nature, particularly by the life cycles of plants and animals. Take, for example, the forest fires in the American West. Though destructive at first glance, these fires are vital for many ecosystems. They help certain plants and trees, like some species of pines, by triggering the release of seeds. Controlled burns of grasslands create space for native grasses to thrive. I have witnessed this firsthand on a friend's farm, where these burns help regenerate the land and encourage the natural growth of local grasses. At the farm, one of my favorite spots to visit is a pecan tree once struck by lightning, its trunk bearing a visible scar, yet it continues to grow, resilient and strong despite its injury. This same farm is home to bald eagles, whose scars—whether from territorial disputes, hunting injuries, or collisions—serve as reminders of their struggles. These same eagles lost their nest in a windstorm but persevered by rebuilding it, continuing to soar nearly every day with grace and precision as they hunt to live. Now, we await the hatching of new eggs, a symbol of hope and renewal. These eagles, like the lightning tree, show us that hardship is not permanently paralyzing, but rather incorporated into the journey. The scars, whether on trees or eagles, integrate into a vibrant, ongoing life, proving that suffering can be more than an endpoint and a passage toward rebirth and strength.

In contemporary medical practice, several approaches focus on the journey of *suffering* from to *living* with illness and injury, emphasizing resilience, empowerment, and the holistic well-being of patients. Palliative care, for instance, focuses not on curing

[16] John 20:24-29.

serious or terminal illnesses but on alleviating symptoms and improving the quality of life for patients. According to the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, "palliative care provides relief from the symptoms, pain, and stress of a serious illness," aiming to improve the patient's overall well-being and dignity as they learn to live with their condition.[17] This approach acknowledges suffering but offers an opportunity for patients to live with it, finding comfort, peace, or meaning. Similarly, chronic disease management emphasizes living with long-term conditions like diabetes or heart disease. Rather than seeking a complete cure, healthcare professionals focus on helping patients manage symptoms, make necessary lifestyle adjustments, and provide emotional support. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains that "successful management of chronic diseases requires a team-based approach, which may include medication, lifestyle changes, and regular monitoring," all aimed at helping patients live well with their conditions.[18]

In the realm of mental health care, therapists help individuals living with chronic conditions such as depression, PTSD, or anxiety develop skills to manage their symptoms and lead fulfilling lives. This process involves reframing negative thoughts and fostering resilience, teaching patients that living with their mental health condition is not only possible but can also lead to personal growth. As psychologist Marsha Linehan notes in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), "DBT teaches people to manage overwhelming emotions, reduce self-destructive behaviors, and cope with life stressors in healthier

[17] American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, "Mission, Vision, Values," American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine (AAHPM), n.d., https://aahpm.org/about-aahpm/mission-vision-values/.
[18] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Chronic Disease Management* (2023), https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/management/index.htm.

ways," ultimately helping individuals live with their emotional struggles in a more balanced and positive way.[19] Peer support and support groups further highlight this model by offering spaces for individuals to share their experiences, gain strength, and provide mutual encouragement. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, "peer support provides a sense of belonging and empowerment,"[20] showing that even in the midst of ongoing challenges, individuals can live with their condition and find meaning, purpose, and resilience.

Summary

The journey from suffering from loss to living with loss has profoundly shaped my approach to both ministry and my personal life. Sudden or unexpected experiences of loss leave an indelible mark, but they can also cultivate a deeper appreciation for grief's place in life. Even the work of meaning-making is challenging and ongoing. This process does not necessarily make one more empathetic in a simplistic sense—"having experienced loss so that I can help others"—but it opens a space where genuine empathy for others' pain can reside. In moments when I encounter someone facing sudden tragedy, I can say, "I have been there," not as someone who knows their exact experience, but as one who carries the scars of grief and loss. Yet, even as we learn to live with grief and recognize it in others, questions remain: Can we expect more than simply living with it? Is there another step? Can the journey through suffering transform us, not only to coexist with our scars, but to thrive in the midst of them? As we move

[19] Marsha Linehan, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*, Diagnosis and Treatment of Mental Disorders (Guilford Press, 1993), 295.
[20] *NAMI Peer-to-Peer* (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.), accessed July 4, 2025, https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Publications-Reports/Reports/NAMI-Peer-to-Peer.

forward, these questions invite a deeper exploration of what it means not just to live with what happens to us, but to embrace the possibility of thriving.

Chapter 5: Thriving

From her hospital bed, six-year-old Mary watches the world drift by. Another long stay for severe asthma feels endless, but she quietly takes it all in. Mary knows the hospital well. When she plays pretend, she is always the doctor—but there is a depth and compassion in her make-believe that is far beyond her years. After one stay, when she was finally discharged, she flipped through photographs from her time in the hospital, pointing out familiar faces, "those nurses showed me God's love when they were kind to me," she tells her mother with simple confidence and certainty. In her childlike faith, Mary names something many adults might miss, even in the hardest places: God is still there. I do not believe she yet intellectually wrestles with deep questions about why suffering exists. Instead, she opens her eyes and looks for God in the small, everyday moments. Between her hospital visits, I watch and admire how Mary races across the playground, sings Taylor Swift as loud as she can, celebrates on the dance floor, dominates on the basketball court, and soccer field with a fierce energy that makes it easy to forget how fragile her health really is. Her world is small, but inside it, Mary sees something real and beautiful: a God who is near, helping her thrive even when life hurts.

Introduction: What Is Thriving?

At just six years old, Mary is too young to name abstract concepts or frame her experience of suffering in philosophical terms. Yet her way of being in the world quietly unsettles a common assumption: that thriving and suffering cannot coexist. Through her childlike perspective, she reveals something striking—that thriving can emerge even in the midst of suffering. She does not avoid pain, nor does she need to make a conscious choice to engage with it; her attention naturally falls on the presence of family, the kindness of healthcare workers, and fleeting moments of peace between breathing treatments. In this unselfconscious way, she shows us something vital about thriving: it is

not the absence or alleviation of hardship, but a receptivity to grace, however small, amid pain. For adults, this capacity often requires deliberate effort, reflection, and the courage to engage with suffering. While human effort matters, it is not the central agent of thriving; grace, relationships, and the conditions of life shape the process in ways beyond individual control. And yet, the question remains: What about when suffering becomes overwhelming? Can we truly find ways to thrive amid chronic illness, grief, or prolonged hardship? What about situations that seem insurmountable, where thriving may never seem possible?

Up to this point, we have explored how to live with injuries and sufferings without being defined by them. Yet there is more to healing than merely managing our wounds; there is another step. It is possible to experience something deeper, something fuller—God's presence in our life, even while we are still suffering. While human response and engagement contribute, it is not our effort alone that produces thriving—God's work and the surrounding context remain central. This chapter argues that thriving is possible, even in suffering. It is not a quick fix or a promise of unbroken happiness, but a part of the journey. Because initial reactions may be shaped by misunderstandings of what thriving means, we will first explore the different definitions before turning to the heart of the argument.

The concept of thriving offers important advantages over flourishing when describing complex lived experiences. Thriving has been defined as "not merely surviving but growing and evolving positively in the face of hardship,"[1] emphasizing

[1] Carol D. Ryff and Burton Singer, "Flourishing under Fire: Resilience as a Prototype of Challenged Thriving.," in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived.*, ed. Corey L. M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt (American Psychological Association, 2003), 15. https://doi.org/10.1037/10594-001.

resilience and ongoing development rather than a static state of optimal functioning. Psychologist Carol Ryff, a leading figure in research on well-being, describes thriving as encompassing "dimensions of purpose, growth, and self-acceptance, even in the presence of suffering."[2] This frames well-being as dynamic and processual, rather than a fixed achievement. Similarly, in sociology, scholars highlight thriving as embedded within social contexts and relationships, noting that "relationships serve an important function of not simply helping people return to baseline, but helping them to thrive by exceeding prior baseline levels of functioning."[3] This relational aspect aligns with theological perspectives that emphasize community and grace as essential to genuine well-being.[4] Thriving thus resists the individualistic and achievement-focused connotations sometimes attached to flourishing, offering instead a more inclusive and realistic language for describing lives marked by challenge but also hope and growth. Even in these academic or social definitions, human effort is important but secondary to relational, communal, and sometimes divine or structural factors that enable thriving. This is not to say that suffering is the only way in which one can experience thriving, but I do contend that it is possible even while suffering persists.

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[2] Carol D. Ryff, "Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 83, no. 1 (2014): 134, https://doi.org/10.1159/000353263.
[3] Brooke C Feeney and Nancy L Collins, "The Importance of Relational Support for Attachment and Exploration Needs," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 25 (February 2019): 182–86, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.11.011.
[4] Paul T. P. Wong, ed., *The Human Quest for Meaning: Theories, Research, and Applications*, Second edition, Personality and Clinical Psychology Series (Routledge, 2012), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203146286.

Cultural Definitions of Thriving

As with suffering, healing, and scars, it is important to understand how different definitions of thriving have been formed, especially in secular contexts. Before we can define thriving through a theological lens, we must first examine the cultural narratives that shape our expectations—often in ways that fall short of any theological recognition of the fullness God offers. This analysis primarily focuses on Western conceptions of thriving, as these have dominated discourse through media, technology, and economic systems. Across industries and movements in the United States, thriving is often portrayed as achieving peak satisfaction, happiness, or personal success—whether through financial stability, emotional well-being, or professional accomplishment. These definitions shape how we perceive growth and set expectations for what life should look like after hardship. By examining these competing visions of thriving, we can better see where they fall short and how they might mislead us as we seek a deeper, more faithful understanding.

The idea of thriving through self-improvement primarily finds itself deeply embedded in Western thought, particularly through traditions of self-help literature and philosophies of personal advancement. From the nineteenth century to today, while the language and methods have evolved, the core belief that individuals are responsible for their own thriving through personal effort has remained remarkably consistent.

In the nineteenth century, thinkers like Samuel Smiles popularized the belief that character, discipline, and perseverance were the true keys to success. In his influential 1859 work *Self-Help*, Smiles famously argued that "the spirit of self-help is the root of all

genuine growth in the individual,"[5] positioning thriving as a moral and practical outcome of hard work and personal discipline. According to this framework, to thrive was not merely to achieve financial stability or social mobility, but to cultivate virtues such as industriousness, frugality, and self-control—qualities believed to naturally lead to outward prosperity. These views reflected the ethos of Victorian Western society, where personal initiative and resilience were considered foundational to a flourishing life. However, this vision of thriving largely reflected the experiences of white, middle-class individuals, sidelining the social and structural factors that affect people from different racial or socioeconomic backgrounds.

As Western economies shifted and consumerism rose during the twentieth century, the understanding of thriving through the self-help industry evolved. Success began to be linked not only with personal virtue but also with visible achievements and material prosperity. The idea of the American Dream amplified these ideals, presenting the belief that relentless effort could secure upward mobility and happiness. As sociologist Robert Bellah explains, the American Dream has "become increasingly associated with personal success and material prosperity,"[6] leading to a definition of thriving that prioritizes individual achievement above all else. In this way, thriving became framed as a public narrative of success—an external demonstration of internal worth. However, as consumerism grew, so did the emphasis on material wealth, further entrenching the notion that those who struggled simply weren't working hard enough. Bellah argues that this shift meant that "the focus on individual achievement has come to overshadow the

[5] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance*, 1st ed (Prakash Book Depot, 2016), 5.
[6] Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1st Perennial Library ed (Harper & Row, 1986), 60.

communal or spiritual dimensions of a fulfilling life."[7] This narrative often glosses over the systemic inequalities that hinder many people's access to the same opportunities, turning the idea of thriving into a race with a starting line that's not equal for everyone. Sociologist William Julius Wilson highlights this reality by noting that "the decline of jobs, especially in the inner city, has created a 'new urban poor' who, despite working hard, are left out of the American Dream"—a challenge to the myth of equal opportunity for all.[8]

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these ideas intensified into what is now known as "hustle culture," a mindset that glorifies constant productivity and self-optimization. The tech boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, especially in Silicon Valley, popularized the notion that thriving meant maximizing work hours and eliminating rest as inefficiency. Industry leaders celebrated the "grind," presenting extreme labor as a badge of honor. Sociologist Juliet Schor explains that in a culture obsessed with achievement and consumption, "people end up working harder for less enjoyment," with busyness itself becoming a marker of status.[9] Hustle culture reflects an increasingly narrow definition of thriving: it is about efficiency, career success, and external validation through perpetual labor, without recognizing the human need for balance or the toll such demands take on emotional health and well-being. During the same period, the self-help industry grew exponentially. What began with writers like Samuel Smiles blossomed into a multibillion-dollar global phenomenon, with over 100,000 self-help titles published—each offering strategies to achieve personal success, optimize happiness, or unlock

[7] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 61.
[8] William J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 114.
[9] Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (Basic Books, 1998).

hidden potential. This explosion reflects both the enduring allure of self-improvement and the commodification of thriving itself, turning personal growth into a product that can be marketed and sold. Yet, in many of these books, the narratives of success often center on individual effort, frequently overlooking the realities of privilege and systemic inequality.

Within hustle culture, thriving is narrowly defined: maximizing efficiency, achieving career success, and securing social validation through constant labor. As Anne Helen Petersen critiques, hustle culture "is built on the myth that you can achieve anything if you just work harder, often at the cost of your health, relationships, and overall well-being."[10] This narrow focus on outward achievement sidelines emotional health, community, and spiritual well-being—key elements of a more holistic, inclusive definition of thriving. This deeply rooted cultural narrative—shaped by capitalism, individualism, and consumerism—distorts thriving by framing it as personal achievement rather than as a communal, grace-infused way of living. In this vision, worth is measured by output rather than by inherent dignity, masking systemic inequalities and shifting the full burden of both success and failure onto the individual. The emphasis on individual effort obscures the larger societal factors that impact people's ability to thrive, such as race, class, and access to resources, reinforcing the idea that success is a purely personal responsibility.

[10] Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, First Mariner Books edition (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 88.

Capitalist and Consumerist Culture: Thriving Through Accumulation

At the heart of Western definitions of thriving lies capitalist and consumerist culture, which defines peak success primarily through the lens of accumulation—whether that be wealth, material goods, or status symbols. As Naomi Klein, a renowned journalist and author known for her critiques of corporate culture and consumerism, succinctly puts it, "The more you buy, the more you become, and the more you consume, the more you are consumed."[11] This system, which emerged from European economic thought and gained dominance globally through colonialism and market expansion, frames success as the ability to constantly produce and consume. The ultimate goal becomes the acquisition of more—more money, more possessions, and more prestige.

This culture places a high value on competition and individual achievement, where thriving is synonymous with achieving financial independence, climbing the social ladder, and attaining a lifestyle marked by luxury and excess. Klein explains that in this context, success is measured by the ability to buy into the system—gaining more than others and presenting an image of affluence that reflects the ideals of capitalist society. This narrative of success is pervasive, shaping not only individual aspirations but societal values as well, reinforcing the belief that material wealth is the ultimate marker of a life well-lived.

Building upon capitalist foundations, social media and influencer culture have further intensified the pressure to equate self-worth with visibility and public achievement. As Sherry Turkle, a sociologist and MIT professor, argues, "We expect more from

[11] Kl Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Nachdr. (Picador, 2002), 2.

technology and less from each other."[12] This insight highlights the way social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have created new avenues for self-promotion, where curated online personas often reflect the idealized "hustle" lifestyle, emphasizing constant productivity, personal branding, and outward success. Influencers—individuals who leverage these platforms to cultivate large followings—are often portrayed as exemplars of ultimate success: financial independence, social influence, and the ability to curate one's life as a model for others to follow.

In this realm, thriving is defined not by personal fulfillment or well-being, but by the ability to amass followers, generate attention, and maintain a polished, aspirational image of success. The impact of this culture on well-being is significant. Turkle explains that social media fosters a "culture of comparison," where individuals continuously measure their lives against the filtered, often unrealistic depictions they see online. This hyper-focus on digital connections and public personas reduces meaningful face-to-face interaction and authentic self-reflection. In influencer culture, success is measured by external markers such as likes, shares, and brand deals, rather than personal growth or relational fulfillment. This constant exposure to a curated version of success, paired with the pressure to maintain a perfect image, can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and burnout. Instead of encouraging genuine connection or personal development, influencer culture promotes a narrow view of thriving centered on outward recognition and external validation.

These definitions of thriving—self-help/hustle culture, capitalism/consumerism, and social media/influencer culture—emerge from and reinforce the Western values of

[12] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic books, 2011), 1.

individualism, materialism, visibility, and self-actualization. None offers a helpful vision or definition of human thriving in the context of suffering. While these frameworks dominate global discourse through economic and media influence, they represent only a narrow slice of human experience, often excluding perspectives from Global South communities, indigenous cultures, and religious traditions. Even within Western contexts, these definitions frequently privilege the experiences of the educated, affluent, and able-bodied. As a result, they fail to account for the full complexity of what it means to thrive—even when considering only cultural definitions, which are often shaped not solely by individual achievement, but by collective values, community, and a sense of belonging. By recognizing these cultural definitions as limited and contextual rather than universal, we can begin to open the door to a more expansive and inclusive understanding of flourishing. This deeper vision of thriving could be rooted in relationships with God, others, and the world around us. However, it's worth noting that even this seemingly more holistic approach often operates within capitalist frameworks, where wellness is commodified—through expensive retreats, products, and services marketed as essential for achieving well-being—making true flourishing accessible primarily to the privileged.

Evangelical Christian Movement and Prosperity Gospel

As we unpack an understanding of thriving, it is important to note the potential theological pitfalls ahead. The Prosperity Gospel movement, particularly within the Evangelical Christian context, I suggest, distorts a biblical understanding of thriving by reducing it to financial wealth and material success. Influential prosperity preachers like

Kenneth Copeland have stated, "Jesus became poor so that we might become rich,"[13] framing Christ's sacrificial death as a pathway to personal financial gain rather than a means of salvation for humanity. Similarly**,** Joel Osteen proclaims, "God wants us to live in victory. He wants us to be happy, healthy, and successful. You can have the desires of your heart. You just have to believe for it,"[14] equating faithfulness to God with the accumulation of wealth and success, stripping faith of its deeper spiritual significance.

Benny Hinn, a leader of the Charismatic branch of the Prosperity Gospel, outright states, "If you're not rich, you're not in God's will,"[15] which imposes a harmful and inaccurate link between financial wealth and spiritual alignment. Joyce Meyer, while promoting self-help-style messages, asserts, "God is not upset with you when you have a need, but He is upset with you when you have a need and you don't do anything about it,"[16] implying that financial hardship is a failure of the individual, rather than recognizing the complexity of systemic and relational issues. This view of success, however, frames material gain as the primary indicator of God's favor, often prioritizing wealth and personal ambition over the broader teachings of Jesus and the deeper dimensions of spiritual transformation. The focus on financial success and personal ambition eclipses deeper spiritual transformation, and often, there is little mention of God's role in these processes. The Prosperity Gospel movement distorts the core message of Christianity, framing thriving not as the flourishing of spiritual life or communion with God, but as a pursuit of affluence, success, and individualism.

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[13] Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Kenneth Copeland Pub./Harrison House, 2009), 33.
[14] Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (FaithWords, 2015), 45.
[15] Benny Hinn, *Good morning, Holy Spirit* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 112.
[16] Joyce Meyer, *Battlefield of the Mind: How to Win the War in Your Mind* (Harrison House, 1995), 122.

Theologians and Christian scholars have critiqued the Prosperity Gospel as a theological distortion that undermines authentic biblical teachings about suffering, sacrifice, and God's will for human life. N.T. Wright critiques the movement's approach, emphasizing that the Bible teaches a radical understanding of flourishing that is rooted in self-giving love, not material wealth. In his work *Surprised by Hope*, Wright highlights that Christian hope focuses on the transformation of both individual lives and creation through God's redemptive work rather than the accumulation of personal wealth. Richard Stearns, former CEO of World Vision, adds that the Prosperity Gospel fosters a "consumer mentality" where Jesus is seen as a means to achieve personal success, instead of a savior who calls us to self-sacrifice and service to others.[17]

Even more recently, Christian influencer-like figures like Rachel Hollis, author of *Girl, Wash Your Face*, have embraced similar language, advising, "You are not stuck, you are not broken, and you can change."[18] While this rhetoric empowers individuals to take control of their lives, it often ignores the transformative power of God's grace and the necessity of humility, surrender, and community in the Christian walk. Televangelists**,** social media influencers, and motivational figures like Hollis often blur the line between secular self-help and Christian faith, leading to a form of "do-it-yourself" spirituality that places the onus of change and thriving on the individual, often neglecting the deeper theological truths of grace, redemption, and community within the body of Christ.

[17] Richard Stearns, *Hole In Our Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life And Might Just Change The World* (Thomas Nelson, 2010).
[18] Rachel Hollis, *Girl, Wash Your Face: Stop Believing the Lies about Who You Are So You Can Become Who You Were Meant to Be* (Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 2018), 50.

My aim here is not to diminish the sincere efforts of numerous dedicated individuals within the evangelical movement who strive to convey the transformative love of Jesus. Many within this community have committed their lives to disseminating the message of grace, hope, and love that is found in Christ. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize how the prosperity gospel, through the evangelical message, has, in numerous instances, been distorted by the influence of the self-help industry and the ascent of popular influencers. In their endeavors to render faith more accessible and appealing, the evangelical movement has frequently obscured the distinction between spiritual transformation and worldly success. The focus has shifted from the significant, divine work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life to a transactional model that prioritizes material blessings, individual effort, and self-centered goals. Consequently, the fundamental role of God in shaping and healing the human soul is often eclipsed by a culture centered on achievement, prosperity, and self-promotion, thereby distorting the true essence of the Christian faith.

Thriving Redefined

In contrast to the secular and prosperity-driven views of thriving—measured by wealth, status, or outward success—the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification offers a richer, theologically grounded understanding of what it means to grow in grace and love and become more attuned to God.

John Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection is rooted in terms of love. He wrote, "In this is perfection … 'Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' … Let your soul be

filled with so entire a love to Him that you may love nothing but for his sake."[19] For Wesley, Christian perfection is not about being free from missteps, errors, or achieving flawless behavior. Rather, it is about opening ourselves—our entire being—to God's love. He clarified in a sermon, "Christian perfection therefore does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness."[20] He also emphasized that the aspiration toward perfect love, the goal to love God and neighbor as best as we can, is essential to Christian life. He defended his understanding of Christian perfection saying "The perfection I hold is so far from being contrary to the doctrine of our Church that it is exactly the same which every clergyman prays for every Sunday: 'Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name.'"[21] Wesley understood Christian perfection as an orientation of the heart toward God and neighbor, an ongoing reality attainable in principle, yet lived out in the tension between of human sinfulness and continued growth in love.

Building on Wesley's framework, we can understand Christian perfection as a lens through which we might approach the Christian life. The possibility of perfect love can shape our thoughts, choices, and actions in the present—even as we acknowledge human finitude, weakness, and sin. Christian perfection is not a measure of flawless execution, and certainly not a standard for judging ourselves or others. Rather, it is the

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[19] John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*. (Abingdon Press, 1998), 11.
[20] Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Abingdon Press, 2002), 61.
[21] John Wesley, *Answer to Rowland Hill's Tract*, vol. 9, The Works of John Wesley (Abingdon press, 1989), 409.

orientation of our hearts that informs ethical and spiritual decisions. It is a paradox—Christian perfection is possible yet temporary; we might hope to be sinless, yet we remain finite. Some aspects of life and of God's work are not meant for our finite minds to fully grasp. This reveals what I personally and pastorally like to call a holy mystery: something our human minds are not meant to fully comprehend. The significance of Christian perfection lies not in how we might achieve it, but in living as if it is possible, opening ourselves to the truly endless possibilities of love.

Ultimately, understanding Christian perfection can reveal a model for living that embraces possibility without demanding certainty. Perfection is not a distant reward or a static endpoint; it is a horizon that shapes action, thought, and relationships, even amid human finitude. Similarly, thriving amid suffering is not a state to be achieved or a problem to be solved, but a way of living oriented toward love, presence, and relational engagement. The logic of these ideas does not fully make sense, and their complete realization may be improbable, but openness to their possibility can transform the present. If perfection encourages love, generosity, and humility; thriving might encourage resilience, compassion, and vulnerability within community.

This perspective provides a useful parallel for understanding thriving amid suffering. Just as Christian perfection calls one to live in alignment with love, thriving does not require the absence of pain or the mastery of life's circumstances. Rather, it is the possibility of engaging fully, faithfully, and generously with the world, even in the midst of difficulty. One may never fully attain perfection, and one may never live entirely free from suffering. Yet the mere possibility of thriving, like the possibility of perfect love, alters how one moves through the world, how one shows up for others, and how one

cultivates resilience and meaning in everyday life. In this sense, both Christian perfection and thriving are dynamic realities whose possibility fundamentally shapes conduct, ethics, and spiritual formation.

Through both cultural and theological definitions, we have seen that thriving is often misunderstood as something that focuses on humans' ability to achieve, work toward, or accumulate. However, thriving, as I propose, is not about escaping suffering or injury or completely overcoming some kind of difficulty by our own efforts. Instead, thriving is a way that we might work to recognize the ongoing work of God's grace in our lives or the lives of others, even when suffering remains. As Henri Nouwen emphasizes, "To be fully alive is to allow God's love to work in us, even when life is painful, fragile, and uncertain."[22] It is the way we describe glimpses of God's kingdom here on earth in the here and now, even while earthly challenges remain. While human choice and effort are part of thriving while suffering, they are not the central agents. Thriving is a way of being that involves hope, connection, and the capacity to grow—even when circumstances remain difficult. Thriving is possible when we recognize that God enables us to thrive, even amid hardship, grief, injury, or suffering. Thriving in this sense is not about complete triumph over our circumstances; it is about being open to the work of God in all things.

Suffering is a universal reality for humans—no social class can exempt us from it, no number of degrees can outthink it, no political or social status can outgrow it, no place in the world, no amount of privilege, can escape it, no wealth can shield us from it, no success can insulate us from it, and no fame can protect us from it. Suffering comes in

[22] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020).

many forms, from many sources. While we cannot be protected from it, those with fewer means often bear a heavier weight, exacerbated by systemic injustice in its many forms. Thriving is about being open to the possibility of living with our suffering while still experiencing the ultimate goodness of God in our lives, which transcends all human circumstances.

Very few understandings of thriving leave room for suffering to persist, or for our internal scars to bring pain when touched. Yet, my understanding of thriving is not merely an abstract ideal; it can be lived out in the most painful moments of our lives. Thriving is not only about meaning-making or offering platitudes. For the couple who have lost a child, it may be finding ways to continue to love despite their grief. For the patient with cancer, it may be discovering new depths of strength and grace, even in the absence of a cure. Thriving is not simply seeing the good but experiencing it, even amidst suffering. Taking inspiration from Mary, thriving can involve looking for God's love in the most desolate circumstances, when there is every reason not to see any light. By God's grace, peace can be found in places that feel utterly empty, purpose can emerge where it seems absent, and transformation occurs in ways not always immediately apparent. Thus, thriving is not about avoiding hardship, nor is it merely learning to endure it; it is trusting that God works through and within us even amid suffering. As Barbara Brown Taylor reflects, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light."[23] This insight underscores that thriving involves embracing the full spectrum of human

[23] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (HarperOne, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 67.

experience, including the painful and challenging moments, as avenues for growth and deeper understanding.

When we reframe thriving in this way, rather than viewing suffering as an obstacle to thriving, we can begin to see it as one of the contexts in which God's grace can work powerfully, though not the only one. Just as gold is refined through fire, so too can our lives be shaped and strengthened through difficulties—but this does not mean God's love and presence are limited to hardship. Even outside of suffering, God's grace is at work, preparing, guiding, and nurturing us in all circumstances. In the midst of pain, God draws near, offering comfort, strength, and healing. It is in these moments that we can experience a deeper, more profound sense of thriving—one that transcends external circumstances and finds its roots in our relationship with God.

Thriving, in this understanding, is not something that can be measured by worldly standards of success or achievement. I myself cannot possibly name all the ways it might manifest. It is not about accumulating wealth, fame, or accolades. Instead, it is about anticipating the quiet, faithful work of God in our lives, transforming us into the people we are called to be. Thriving is about recognizing that our worth is not defined by our achievements, but by our identity as beloved children of God. Even in the midst of our suffering, we can find comfort in the fact that we are held in God's grace and that, no matter what happens, we are never alone. Thriving is not about being perfect or free from pain, suffering, or injury. It is about believing in the possibility of hope, peace, and purpose in the midst of life's challenges, trusting that God's grace is sufficient for us, even when we feel weak or overwhelmed. Thriving, in this sense, is a lifelong journey of

growing closer to God, finding strength in our struggles, and learning to live with open hearts in the midst of life's uncertainties.

Summary

I have recognized the challenge of using the word thriving at all—it can seem lofty, elusive, or even inappropriate, and at first glance, it may appear implausible, ill-informed, or simply aspirational to look to a six-year-old as an example. However, if we allow Mary's story to serve as a compelling illustration of what it means to anticipate the possibility of thriving—not in the absence of suffering, but through it—we are invited to reconsider the possibility of thriving while suffering from or living with. Just as Wesley's doctrine of sanctification emphasizes that perfection is not about a human's ascension toward a life without sin, but about being made more perfect through them by the grace of God, thriving is about recognizing the ways that God's goodness might enter our lives even while we are still suffering. While I cannot put forward exactly how this works for every human person, I believe it exists—a holy mystery.

As her pastor, I watch Mary thrive beyond the limitations of her illness, excelling in sports, showing care and compassion in her school. And seeing God's love reflected in her nurses' care, she shows me that thriving is not a destination—it is an ongoing journey of being shaped by love. It is the process of moving forward through hardship with grace, not in isolation, but with God's love guiding every step. While watching Mary and others facing insurmountable circumstances, I see that thriving is not the absence of struggle but the presence of God in the midst of it.

Chapter 6: The Church and the Journey

As I have mentioned in other sections, the power of popular culture is in the way art of many forms can reframe the profound in shockingly simple ways. This story, adapted in various ways over the decades, as told through the television series, *The West Wing*, is a powerful example:

> "This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me. Can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."[1]

I was deeply moved the first time I watched this Emmy-winning episode of *The West Wing*, and I still find myself crying at this scene every time I rewatch it; however, I did not realize at first how perfectly it mirrored the biblical parable I had heard countless times. Despite a lifetime of Sunday school, a longstanding love for the Bible, and advanced theological study, I failed to recognize the story of the Good Samaritan when it appeared in a secular source. Despite years of Sunday school lessons, sermons, and church discussions, it was the late John Spencer's performance that most compellingly captured and personally clarified the message of the Good Samaritan in my heart. His portrayal of a character struggling with alcoholism while supporting another staffer with

[1] *The West Wing*, Season 2, Episode 10, "Noël," written by Aaron Sorkin, aired December 13, 2000, on Warner Bros. Television.

PTSD, in *The West Wing,* became the foundational inspiration for my living after Sam's death, the way I counsel others as a pastor or a friend, and ultimately, this very thesis.

This parable serves as a powerful reminder that we are not meant to carry our burdens alone. Sharing our stories—our pain, our healing, and our journeys—can build bridges of connection and hope. What we choose to share might be exactly what someone else needs to hear in order to keep moving forward. The phrase "know the way out" foreshadows the idea that there is a path forward—that things can get better. In the next scene of *The West Wing* episode, a character portraying a trauma specialist affirms this hope by saying we can expect to move forward "because we get better," highlighting that healing is possible, and we are never stuck in our worst moments. Healing is possible through many avenues: people go to therapy, take medication, give themselves time, and work to reconnect with their authentic selves. But perhaps most importantly, healing often happens within a community of people who love us.

The Church as Community: Biblical and Theological Foundations

The church has historically been, and continues to be, a place where supportive community can be fostered and nurtured. The church remains a vital space where individuals can find empathy, support, and love—an environment where healing, connection, and growth are possible. This model of shared experience and mutual support is exemplified in organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous. As the AA Big Book states, "It works if you work it," emphasizing that recovery depends on honest sharing and mutual support within the fellowship.[2] Through the sharing of their stories, members

[2] *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, Fourth edition (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001), 58.

realize they are not alone, finding hope and strength to move forward together—a powerful example of how community fosters healing and transformation.

To fully support individuals on their journey from suffering to thriving, the church must renew its commitment to mission by shifting its focus from mere internal survival to becoming a transformative presence in the world. At the heart of biblical community is the call to care—to bear one another's burdens,[3] to mourn with those who mourn,[4] and to encourage one another daily.[5] This kind of care is not a passive sentiment but an active practice, modeled perfectly by Jesus through his ministry of presence, healing, and restoration. When the church truly embraces this calling, it moves beyond simply gathering as a community to becoming a living embodiment of God's love in action.

While the regularly gathered church community can provide a powerful sense of belonging, congregational care plays a crucial role in helping individuals move from suffering to thriving. Care from pastors and church leaders is important—they offer counseling, guidance, and the vital presence of walking alongside people through their journeys. But care does not fall under the responsibility of the clergy or church leadership alone. There is profound value in connecting those who are struggling with laypeople who have "been in the hole before and know the way out."[6] This may not be the pastor or church lay leader. Within the church, many have experienced deep suffering and found healing, and their testimonies can serve as beacons of hope for others. In moments of

[3] Galatians 6:2.
[4] Romans 12:15.
[5] Hebrews 3:13.
[6] The West Wing, "Noël."

crisis, genuine care—from both clergy and laity—becomes a tangible expression of God's presence, offering comfort, practical help, and a listening ear.

As Henri Nouwen writes, care is about "being with" those who suffer, not simply "doing for" them.[7] More importantly, it encourages individuals to see their suffering not as the end of their story but as part of a larger narrative of redemption—a journey from pain to healing, from suffering to thriving. As Rachel Held Evans beautifully reminds us, "Community is not about being alike, but about being real. When we dare to show our brokenness, we make space for healing and hope."[8] By embracing a vision of care that includes the whole congregation—where vulnerability is met with compassion and shared burdens lead to healing—the church can reclaim its true mission as a transformative community that guides all from suffering toward thriving. Yet such a vision must also be held in tension with the brokenness that marks real congregational life.

The Reality Check: The Church's Imperfection

While it is encouraging—and even fulfilling as a pastor—to reflect on the ideal goodness of community as it is meant to be experienced in the church, it is necessary to name the reality. Scripture affirms that God established the importance of community, confirmed by Jesus, continued through the apostles, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Yet the church—made up of imperfect humans—has also been an agent of harm throughout its history. As theologian Miroslav Volf observes, "The church is always a fragile

[7] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (The Crown Publishing Group, 2013), 27.
[8] Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nelson Books, 2015), 135.

community, subject to sin, conflict, and exclusion," a reminder that Christian community exists in the tension between divine calling and human frailty.[9]

This tension is present throughout Scripture itself. The Bible consistently portrays God's community as both called and flawed—a people meant to reflect holiness, justice, and love, yet repeatedly confronting human frailty. From Cain's violence against Abel to Israel's rebellions and Korah's challenge to God's appointed leaders, the Old Testament narrative shows a community living outside God's intentions. Old Testament expert, John Goldingay observes, "The stories of Israel's failures are not digressions; they are integral to understanding God's covenantal purposes and the persistent call to live faithfully."[10] These failures, then, are not mere side notes but reminders that God's covenant still unfolds through a people who stumble even as they remain summoned to holiness. The law provides guidance for navigating these failures, embedding accountability and care into God's design for communal life. The same tension continues in the New Testament, where early churches wrestled with disputes over circumcision, inclusion of Gentiles, and questions of spiritual authority. N. T. Wright notes, "The apostles do not pretend that the church is perfect; their letters show a people learning to live under God's reign amidst their imperfections."[11] Rather than disguising the church's struggles, the epistles reveal that imperfection is part of the church's story, even as the community is continually called to grow into God's vision. Ethical instruction in Scripture, then, is inseparable from human weakness: it prescribes God's intentions while acknowledging the messy

[9] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Revised and updated (Abingdon Press, 2019), 38.
[10] John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (IVP Academic, 2016).
[11] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Two Book Set*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Fortress Press, 2013).

reality of life together. Even amid these failures, Scripture points to God's enduring vision.

Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us, “When the church is true to its nature, it knows neither division nor disunity,” a vision that points to the ideal toward which the church is always called, even amid its failures.[12] This vision is echoed by theologians and biblical scholars who stress that the church’s strength lies not in isolated individuals, but in the life of the community itself. Renita J. Weems, a biblical scholar, theologian, and ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, underscores this point, observing, “The Bible is a communal book, not an individualistic one,” highlighting that the call to live in relationship with others lies at the heart of God’s design.[13] Old Testament expert Walter Brueggemann adds, “The community is the primary agent of God’s action in the world,” underscoring that community is not simply a human preference or choice but a divine mandate woven into Israel’s identity.[14] Similarly, Lynn H. Cohick notes in reference to Acts that “[the] early church was marked by a commitment to one another’s welfare, demonstrating the importance of community in the life of the believer.”[15] These additional perspectives remind us that the vitality and witness of the church are sustained not by idealized visions alone, but by intentional, interconnected relationships that embody God’s purpose for the people of God.

The reality of the church’s missteps is not limited to an abstract concept; a quick scroll through my nearly two thousand Facebook friends reveal something heartbreaking:

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[12] Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, with Coretta Scott King (Beacon Press, 2019), 46.
[13] Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Fortress Press, 1995), 23.
[14] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Fortress Press, 1990), 63.
[15] Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 27.

friends, family members, and clergy colleagues who carry deep wounds from their experiences within church communities. These wounds do not come from church buildings—they come from the people who make up those holy communities. In recent years, the rise of conversations about faith deconstruction—especially online—has revealed just how widespread and personal this pain is.[16] This is not limited to my circle of friends and family members online, but this is where I see it. For many, deconstruction is not about abandoning faith, but about grappling honestly with the harm they have experienced in spaces meant to embody healing, grace, and belonging. According to research from the Barna Group, "many prodigals also admit to having had a negative experience in church or with Christians."[17] The very word *prodigal* carries layered meaning, drawn from Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, where a child who leaves home in rebellion is eventually welcomed back by a gracious father.[18] In church contexts, the label has often been used to describe those who wander from faith but are expected to return repentant, reinforcing an assumption that leaving is temporary and that "coming home" is a faithful resolution. Even the Barna Group's use of *prodigals* tends to refer specifically to those who return to faith or church life after a period of deconstruction and reconstruction, representing only one possible outcome of the journey. These stories are not rare—they are everywhere, and they matter.

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16 By "deconstruction," I refer to the process in which individuals—often raised in a faith tradition or converted at a young age—begin to critically examine, question, and often reject previously held religious beliefs. This journey can lead to a renewed, reshaped faith for some, while others may step away from organized religion altogether.

[17] Barna Group, *Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials* (Barna Group, 2013), https://barna.org/research/three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials/.

[18] Luke 15:11-32

The Church as a Healing Space

For faith to be strengthened in community, the church must be a place where everyone—those suffering from, those living with, and those thriving—can share their stories, find encouragement, and walk together in faith. Because when people are free to bring their whole selves—grief, questions, joy, and all—they discover that faith is not something we hold alone, but something nurtured together. A thriving church community is not one where suffering is endured silently but where healing happens through mutual support and the visible presence of Christ's love. When the church bridges the gap between those inside and those outside, it transforms from a place of exclusion to a source of strength and renewal for all, empowering individuals to move beyond survival toward true thriving.

The communal aspects of church life provide a critical foundation for individuals on the journey toward healing and the possibility of thriving. Worship, fellowship, study, and prayer are integral to this process. Through communal worship, individuals have the opportunity to connect with God and one another, finding comfort and strength as they engage with music, Scripture, and the sacraments while sitting shoulder to shoulder with their neighbor. Fellowship, in its simplest form, reassures us that we are not alone in our struggles, cultivating bonds of belonging that push back against isolation. Study grounds the community in God's Word, inviting dialogue, questions, and deeper understanding that equip believers to navigate both suffering and joy with theological imagination. Prayer—whether spoken together in liturgy, whispered in intercession, or offered silently in solidarity—draws the community into God's care and binds people together in shared dependence on grace. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, "No one can face life in

isolation…We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to see and find the way."[19] His words echo the reality that the practices of the church are not ends in themselves but means of mutual support, nurturing people who walk the journey of faith side by side.

In times of suffering, support groups and prayer circles become spaces where individuals can express their pain and find solidarity, while also gaining perspective and encouragement. Moreover, acts of service—whether through church ministries or caring for neighbors—can create space for people to live meaningfully even in pain, without needing to explain or justify their suffering. Thriving, in this sense, is about continuing to live with hope, connection, and dignity. If the church can stand alongside those who suffer, we may help nurture resilience—not by fixing pain, but by showing that even amid it, life can still hold beauty, purpose, and relationship.

Healing within the Christian tradition is not solely an individual pursuit but is deeply embedded in communal practices that foster movement from suffering, through living with it, to thriving. The church, as the body of Christ, provides sacred rhythms that sustain individuals through hardship and guide them toward healing. Again, Rachel Held Evans insightfully reminds us, "Community is the air we breathe when we are made in the image of a God who is relationship."[20] Whether through sacramental participation, singing a beloved hymn, the preached word, or intentional small-group support, communal practices play a crucial role in shaping how individuals experience and navigate suffering.

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[19] Benedict, *Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), 32.
[20] Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nelson Books, 2018), 77.

One of the most powerful ways the church facilitates healing is through the sacraments, which affirm God's presence and love even in the midst of pain. The sacraments call for the congregation to come together, despite all the temptations that tell human persons to separate.[21] In baptism, individuals understand their sins being washed away, but they are also initiated into the family of God. The congregational response at the end of the United Methodist baptismal liturgy captures this understanding. After the candidate is baptized or confirmed, the congregation responds: "With God's help, we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust in God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life."[22] The Lord's Supper, for instance, is not merely an act of remembrance of Christ's last meal, but a means of grace—a real and tangible encounter with Christ's presence that nourishes us for the journey as we open ourselves to the possibility of perfection. As John Wesley emphasized, the Lord's Supper is "the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty and leads us on to perfection."[23] In receiving the bread and cup, individuals are reminded that Christ, too, suffered, and in that suffering, God is present with us. The open table—the United Methodist practice of welcoming all people to Holy Communion, regardless of church membership—reflects God's radical hospitality, inviting everyone, whether rejoicing or grieving, confident or questioning, suffering or living or thriving, to

[21] David M. Knight, *Living the Sacraments: A Call to Conversion* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1985).
[22] "The Baptismal Covenant I" *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*. (United Methodist Publ. House, 1998), 35.
[23] Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Abingdon Press, 2002), 397.

share in grace together. When I administer communion and explain the open table, I often say, “If you have Jesus in your heart, you want to have Jesus in your heart, or even if you wish you wanted to have Jesus in your heart, the grace available in this moment is available to you.” In this communal reception, we are not only sustained as individuals but bound more deeply to one another, reaffirming our shared identity as the body of Christ.

The church’s role in healing does not end with the individual or even just its members; rather, it extends into the fabric of the entire community, fostering a movement of personal restoration and collective thriving. While suffering is often deeply personal, healing and growth are never meant to be solitary processes. As individuals move beyond their own pain, they become living witnesses to the transformative work of God, strengthening the church as a whole. A thriving church is not merely a collection of healed individuals but a community that embodies resilience, compassion, and shared thriving. In this way, thriving is not a fixed destination or a onetime accomplishment, but a continuous, reciprocal movement—individuals are nurtured within the church, and in turn, they help cultivate a community that fosters healing for others. This vision of collective thriving aligns deeply with the church’s mission to be a transformative presence in the world, embodying God’s love and justice beyond its walls. It is not about perfection or the absence of suffering but about a church that fully embodies its calling: a place where brokenness is met with grace, healing is shared, and thriving becomes a communal witness to the goodness of God. Rachel Held Evans says, “Church is not a place where perfect people gather. It is a gathering of broken people committed to the

work of loving and healing one another."[24] This recognition calls the church to embrace its role as a community where thriving is a shared journey, sustained by mutual care, grace, and the mission to bring God's healing love to the world.

Characteristics of a Thriving Church

A thriving church is not simply a refuge for those who have already overcome suffering, nor is it a place only for those who are currently suffering; it is a community that embraces imperfection and vulnerability, recognizing that brokenness and honesty are essential to authentic faith. Such a community actively participates in radical hospitality, transforming isolation into belonging and making space for all who enter. Its care extends beyond the walls of the congregation, carrying compassion into the wider world and embodying God's love in tangible ways. A thriving church supports people across all stages of life and faith, whether they are suffering, living with ongoing challenges, or even experiencing healing, joy, and even if they are thriving. At its heart, it believes in the possibility of living toward thriving, not as the absence of hardship but as a faithful journey together, grounded in resilience, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to walk alongside one another.

Pastor Tara Beth Leach writes, "The church is a people who live out the good news of Jesus by welcoming the wounded and broken, offering sanctuary not because we have it all together but precisely because we do not."[25] Radical hospitality acknowledges that thriving is not about perfection but about authentic presence in the messiness of life.

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[24] Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 178.

[25] Tara Beth Leach, *Radiant Church: Restoring the Credibility of Our Witness* (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 42.

More than a refuge, a thriving church is a dynamic community of healing and sending, where individuals are not only supported in their pain but empowered to become agents of transformation in the world. A thriving church does not hoard healing or respite for members only but actively seeks to extend healing to others. It becomes a living witness to Christ's love and grace, engaging in ministries of justice, mercy, and restoration.

A thriving church is not simply dependent on the strength or health of its pastor or church leaders but relies fundamentally on the collective work of its laity and the whole community. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously argued, the church is "the fellowship of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord," where "each one receives the other in order to serve him."[26] The call to care is not limited to pastoral leadership; it is a shared responsibility where every member participates in bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another, and creating a culture that prioritizes mutual support and openness. Leach further emphasizes that "the mission of the church cannot rest on the shoulders of a few but requires the faithful participation of the whole body."[27] Thriving happens when the whole community commits itself to nurturing one another toward healing and growth.

In this collective calling, thriving becomes possible because the church's mission shifts from preserving an institution or a single leader to cultivating a resilient, compassionate community that extends beyond the walls of the church itself. Members actively engage beyond the Sunday gathering, building relationships where vulnerability is met with empathy and hope. This communal involvement expands the church's

[26] Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John W. Doberstein, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (Harper San Francisco, 1993), 45.
[27] Leach, *Radiant Church,* 73.

reach—meeting people where they are, responding to their needs, and welcoming them into spaces of belonging and restoration. Henri Nouwen reminds us that "community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives," but it is also "the place where we can grow and heal together."[28] This imperfect but intentional togetherness characterizes the thriving church.

Ultimately, the vision of a thriving church is not rooted in perfection but in faithfulness—an unwavering commitment to journey together through the complexities of suffering, doubt, and joy, coupled with a courageous willingness to try. A thriving church understands the importance of taking just one more step in the journey of healing. A community that anticipates the possibility of thriving looks forward with hope. Thriving is not the absence of hardship but the resilience to live fully even in the midst of it—rooted in the promise that God is with us in every season, helping transform suffering into growth. The thriving church collectively refuses to let suffering have the final word, nurturing instead a vision of hope, restoration, and ongoing healing that calls all to be part of the journey toward thriving.

The thriving church, then, is the kind of community where the story of the Good Samaritan and the story of the "man in the hole" come alive. It is the place where someone can say, "I have been there before, and I will not leave you alone," and where another voice joins in, "I may not know your exact pain, but I am here with you and will walk with you until we find a way forward." This is the witness of Christ embodied in community: presence that refuses to abandon, grace that refuses to give up, and hope that refuses to let despair define the end of the story.

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[28] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975), 92.

Summary

Just as the Good Samaritan saw the wounded man and acted, the church, at its best, becomes a place where people recognize both suffering and hope. It is where someone can say, "I have been in the hole before, and I know the way out," and yet also stand beside those whose experiences are different, offering presence without judgment or the pressure to fix. True care honors the reality of hardship while opening space for growth and restoration. Thriving, in this light, is not the absence of suffering but the presence of faithful companions along the way.

A thriving church nurtures those who are suffering and those who are simply living with hardship but also believes in the possibility of thriving—not because it produces polished lives or perfect outcomes, but because it becomes a launching point. It is where others find their voice in worship, where they discover purpose in lifting others up. It is a space where hardship is not hidden but held—and, in being held, transformed. Beyond individual healing, the church itself thrives when it moves outward, meeting people where they are, embodying God's compassion in practical, radical ways. Outreach becomes not just charity, but a declaration that no one suffers alone. The church thrives not by avoiding pain, but by walking into it with courage, conviction, and Christlike love. The church is not merely a place to gather. It is the sacred space where we are reminded that we are not alone, that our stories are not over, and that thriving is possible not despite our wounds, but through them.

Conclusion

These stories and observations call the church, and each of us, to resist the urge to fix or explain, and instead to stay—present, faithful, and tender—in the tension of what is unresolved. In doing so, we create spaces where people are not only seen but also held; not only comforted but accompanied. This is the sacred task: to walk with one another, not around suffering, but through it—honestly, communally, and with hope.

The question may still linger: "How can someone who has been through this even hope to thrive?" Life presents circumstances that are almost unfathomable—events that continue to surprise us, even when we think we have seen the worst imaginable. We face new ways of losing loved ones, tragedies unfolding in numbers we never anticipated, and natural disasters that defy prediction. I do not offer a solution here, but I pray that amid and after such experiences, the love of God might be so undeniable for those still living that they might encounter what I have chosen to call thriving—even if that is not quite the right word, and even if someone else might use a different term. May we refuse to settle for simply living, surviving, or coping, and instead embrace life more fully, trusting that God's love reaches through every circumstance—not to erase our suffering, but to remind us that not one of us is left behind.

We are not just called to live with our suffering.
We are called to believe we can thrive.

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