

“If you want a book that promises you a life of instant healing and happy endings, give this book a miss. You’ll be better off with the many books that specialize in empty promises. But if you want a book that is realistic about years of chronic pain and debilitating depression, yet drives you toward the comforts of Christ and his gospel, read this book. Dave Furman does not provide us with an abstract dissertation; rather, out of his own experience he shows us what it means to kiss the wave that throws you onto the Rock of Ages.”

**D. A. Carson**, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

*“Embracing God in Your Suffering* was not simply written by Dave Furman. Dave lives these words. He knows what it is to gasp for air in the churning place where wave smashes stone. With faithful endurance and Scripture-seasoned words, Dave compels us to think of our inevitable suffering theologically, not theoretically. With a courageous heart, he loves his family, serves his flock, and champions the cause of our sovereign God with a vigorous joy that belies his constant chronic pain. Jesus is the hero of his story. Dave Furman is eminently qualified to shepherd us in the matter of suffering, for not only is he a herald of God’s Word, but he is also a man who is learning, over and over, to embrace God in his suffering.”

**Colin Buchanan**, singer; songwriter

“Dave so gently reminds us that God doesn’t expect us to call the hardest parts of life ‘good,’ but instead desires for us to hold fast to his immeasurable, neverending goodness in the midst of our suffering.”

**Jennie Allen**, author, *Nothing to Prove*; Founder,  
IF:Gathering

“Dave Furman not only offers a careful exegesis of the Word of God for those who are suffering, but also shares his own story of constant pain and weakness in light of a God who loves. This is not a detached theological examination of suffering in God’s world, but rather the testimony of a man who loves God and desires to live according to God’s call on his life despite being unable to button his own shirt. If you’re suffering, you need to read this book. If you love other sufferers, share it with them.”

**Elyse Fitzpatrick**, author, *Home: How Heaven and the New Earth Satisfy Our Deepest Longings*

“This is a remarkable book—searingly honest, genuinely funny, relentlessly grounded, and, above all, saturated with the gospel. Dave Furman has succeeded in equipping us to face the suffering that eventually comes to all of us in a way that flows from who we are in Christ. He has provided us with a rich and moving exposition of what the Christian life looks like in real time. Let me put this simply: read this book!”

**Gary Millar**, Principal, Queensland Theological College, Australia; author, *Calling on the Name of the Lord* and *Now Choose Life*; coauthor, *Saving Eutychus*

“Dave Furman knows suffering and trials better than most men I know. They are not mere theoretical constructs in his life, but everyday realities that propel him into the arms of a loving Savior. With a pastor’s heart and a fellow sufferer’s empathy, Dave guides us with his characteristic lucidity, warmth, and clear-mindedness. He reminds us that in times of trial and trouble, far from being absent, the Father’s pruning hand is closest to us. Don’t read this book to merely gain knowledge or a quick fix, but to truly understand and live out the psalmist’s cry, ‘It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.’”

**Jonathan Holmes**, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling; Council Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition

“I was deeply encouraged by this book! It is great for anyone, but just right for someone in the midst of suffering. Few can achieve the delicate balance between biblical truth, empathy, and understanding of the struggle, while also pointing toward hope in the Lord. Dave has done this well. His meditations on Scripture comfort and encourage us to see joy in God’s good plans for even the hardest trials of our life. Stories from his personal struggles and those of others add a sense of camaraderie and bring to life the fight for joy in the middle of great trials. A great resource!”

**Connie Dever**, author, *He Will Hold Me Fast*; Curriculum and Music Writer, The Praise Factory

*Embracing*  
GOD  
*in Your*  
SUFFERING

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DAVE FURMAN



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	1
Introduction.....	5
1 Look to the Savior in the Storm .....	13
2 He is Our Refuge .....	25
3 The Ultimate Rescue Mission .....	37
4 The Greatest Exchange in All of History .....	47
5 Jesus is Raised.....	59
6 Look, I Am Your Father .....	71
7 He Really Knows Every Hair on Your Head.....	81
8 Our Pain Has a Glorious Purpose .....	91
9 Weakness is Always the Way .....	101

10 You are a Part of Christ's Body.....	113
11 Christ Will Hold You Fast .....	123
12 Extreme Makeover .....	133
13 Heaven is for Real .....	143
Conclusion.....	153
Appendix: Recommended Resources .....	159
Scriptural Index.....	165
Notes .....	169

## INTRODUCTION

The community was abuzz as our neighbors prepared for the big religious holiday. Everyone on our street was in a good mood and extra cheerful, but I had no desire to leave our house and interact with anyone.<sup>1</sup>

It was difficult to go anywhere with the nerve spasms radiating through my arms. When our family left the house to run errands, my agony only intensified. We provided quite a scene for our neighbors to observe through their upstairs windows. First, my wife, Gloria, buckled our daughter into her car seat, and then she came over to the other side of the vehicle to help me. She opened my door, waited until I sat down, reached over and buckled my seat belt, closed my door, walked through the yard and opened the gate, drove the car out of the driveway, got out and closed the gate, and then returned to the car and drove us away.

Then, when we returned home, we repeated the scene in reverse. But this time, my wife carried all of the

groceries—in addition to the baby—into our home. Did I mention she was also pregnant?

We came to the village intending to change the world for Jesus, but I couldn't even change my jeans without help. My nerve ailment had come back, and it was nastier than ever. I was depressed, incorrigible, and seething with anger toward God, my wife, and everyone around me.

Four months prior to our arrival in the Middle East, I'd had extensive surgery. Both my arms were operated on at the same time, and the recovery was traumatic. Years previously, I had developed a neurological disorder, lost almost all my arm strength, and suffered constant burning sensations in both arms. After a couple of years of deteriorating strength I was now disabled. I could barely use my arms. We had tried just about every other treatment option, so we were hopeful surgery would finally provide healing.

My health improved after the procedure, and my strength increased with physical therapy, so we went forward with our plans to move overseas. We were eager to start church planting work, and we hoped I would finally have the “normal,” healthy body I remembered and was now dreaming of.

Then, in one moment, everything fell apart. I had dropped Gloria off at the supermarket but could not find a parking space. I drove up and down the parking lot aisles, waiting until she was done shopping. As I made a left turn, I felt a sharp burning pain in both of my arms. I instantly lost all strength. Tears flooded my face—the soreness was back. Not only had my pain returned, but it was worse than before. I lost all dexterity in my hands and developed boil-like wounds on my fingers. I couldn't stand to touch anything. I was on high-



dosage medications for my nerve pain and for anxiety and depression. At one point, when I ran out of the depression medication and could not refill it in our new country, I felt like I was losing my mind. I paced up and down the length of our bedroom most nights as I yelled at myself and to myself.

I tried reading Christian books, but none of them performed the magic trick of emotional transformation I hoped for. We watched all nine seasons of a celebrated sitcom in an attempt to cheer up, but it was all to no avail.

I wanted to die.

That was almost twenty years ago. Fast forward to today, and I wish my story had a happy ending to share with you, but it doesn't. At least not the way most people describe as "happy." I am not physically healed. Although I have reasonable control over my arms and hands, I am still disabled. I can't drive, shake hands, pick up my children, open most doors, put on my seatbelt, flush the toilet, turn a key, do most household chores, change a diaper, or lift more than a couple pounds. My arms hurt all the time. I live with the burning pain from my elbows down to my forearms twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes I feel like ripping my arms off my body (though I often chuckle that I don't actually have the strength to carry out that task). I am even developing a new tingling sensation and weakness in my legs. Throughout this journey I have struggled greatly with depression, and some days life seems completely hopeless.

But something in my life did change. About two months away from starting a new church, I began to see the sun peering out from the clouds of depression. I was convicted by God for being a self-centered and hurtful husband. I also saw my own hypocrisy as a man who was

about to preach to others when I was not living a life of grace myself. The most vital change was a rediscovery of God and his gospel.

All three of these things happened at about the same time, and for the first time in a couple of years the darkness started lifting. It did not totally disappear, but I saw the light of Christ once more. I again hoped in God. I began embracing my trials as something God meant for my good and his glory. I found hope again in the one God of the universe. The Lord began to teach me what the late British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon meant when he said that trials teach hard lessons.

Spurgeon struggled greatly with depression throughout his life and ministry. At the age of twenty-two, seven people died in a stampede during one of his sermons after someone in the crowd yelled, “Fire!” He never got over that night. He also faced intense public slander during his ministry. His wife, Susannah, was an invalid from her early thirties and could rarely attend church gatherings to hear her husband teach God’s Word. Physical affliction also marked Spurgeon’s own life as he struggled with intense and agonizing seasons of gout. His body ached continuously from rheumatism and inflamed kidneys. Due to these sicknesses, he was out of his church’s pulpit about a third of the time, and the dark clouds of depression often hung over him. He once wrote about his depression, “My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for.”<sup>2</sup> All this continued until God finally took him home at the age of fifty-seven.

How did Spurgeon persevere through his trials? A clue is found in a quote often attributed (though we are unsure if he ever said it) to him: “I have learned to kiss the wave that

throws me against the Rock of Ages.”<sup>3</sup> What does it mean to “kiss the wave”?

When I am in the midst of suffering, I am doing my best just to keep my head above water as the stormy waves of suffering crash over me. I have often longed to be lifted out of the rough and dark waters that feel as if they are engulfing me. I have spent many long nights despising those waves. I have never thought about embracing God in the midst of them.

I don’t think Spurgeon gives us trite advice, pretending as if suffering is not difficult. I also don’t think he is telling us to act as if our situations are easy: *Just try harder and kiss those waves*. No, Spurgeon tells us that God is doing more in our suffering than we can see with our eyes. None of us enjoys adversity. We want out, and yet God in his grace uses suffering for our benefit.

Spurgeon has good advice for us. Stop flailing your arms in panic and embrace the God who has sovereignly designed your circumstances. In the midst of the storm, God has your good and his glory in mind. Romans 8:28 is not just a verse for a Christian greeting card, but one we should have branded on our hearts: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

Hardship, sorrow, disability, persecution, and death are *not* good in themselves. But God in his grace uses them for our good and his glory. The nearness of God awakens us to him in our trials and draws us toward his grace. It is in these times when we need to follow Milton Vincent’s counsel and stop trusting in our everchanging circumstances to bring us joy, and instead rest in the one great, permanent circumstance given to us in Christ and the gospel.<sup>4</sup> Jesus, God in the flesh,

came to us and died on the cross, taking the ultimate wave of death and judgment upon himself so that we could be lifted up to everlasting life. Can the waves of trials drown us when we have a Savior who endured the greatest trial in our place?

The truth is, none of us is immune from suffering. If we are not currently experiencing the effects of a broken world, we will. The band R.E.M put it well when they sang, “Everybody hurts sometimes.”<sup>5</sup> While those words may not bring us much comfort, they speak truth. Tim Keller writes:

No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career—something will inevitably ruin it.<sup>6</sup>

Maybe you’re going through a great trial right now:

- You are depressed and can’t see a way out of your despair.
- You are disabled, and your pain and handicap are too much to accept. You don’t know if you can go on much longer.
- You had a miscarriage, and you are heartbroken that you might never have biological children.
- You were physically or sexually abused as a child and live every day in the haunting memory of what happened to you.

- You are facing weeks of chemotherapy, and you don't know if you can find the strength to make it to the hospital another day.
- You lost a loved one and miss him or her dearly.
- You hate your life. Your marriage stinks. You despise your job, and you wish everything about your life would change.

Friend, there is no guarantee that anything you can do will bring happiness or relief. No mathematical equation provides the exact roadmap or recipe to make you feel better. There is no special button to push that guarantees your life will turn around. *But* there is hope in who God is and what he has done for Christians through Christ. If you are a believer in Christ, you enjoy several realities in this present life and for eternity that are both startling and wonderful. In the pages ahead, my goal is not to give you trite advice or appeal to your emotions as a way of finding joy. We don't "feel better" by trying harder or distracting ourselves. We don't lift ourselves out of the pit through positive thinking. Instead I can think of no better way forward than to point you to the greatness of our God and all that he has done for us in Christ Jesus. It's only when we take our eyes off of ourselves and our circumstances and we gaze upon him and his work that we can keep our heads above water when the high tide of our trials comes our way. My prayer for this book is that it will lead you to the source of all hope. I pray that in your pain, you would not despair but would embrace God in the midst of your suffering.

If you feel like you can't take another day in your suffering, the Rock of Ages is with you, and he is faithful. You may not be able to embrace God in your suffering now, but this wave can take you on into a deeper, joyous walk with him.

Reading this book is not a magic formula to give you joy. But God can use these truths to lift the floodgates of your heart so his joy can fill you to overflowing.

## LOOK TO THE SAVIOR IN THE STORM

One April evening in 2006, a group of university students and administrators were driving on a highway when a tractor trailer crossed the median, slammed into their van, killed five of the passengers, and left one seriously injured and in a coma.

It was stunning, tragic news for Whitney Cerak's family, and they were devastated upon hearing that their daughter was among those killed in the wreck. They couldn't bear to look at her body. The funeral was a closed-casket ceremony that drew well over a thousand people. Friends and family came from all over to mourn this young woman's death.

The family of Laura van Ryn, another student in the van, were thrilled that their daughter survived the crash, and they rushed to the hospital to be with her. She was in a coma, but they stood by her for weeks, praying she would wake up and

talk to them once again. Then the miracle happened. Laura woke up and made some small steps to recovery that her parents documented on a website. One day Laura fed herself applesauce and played a game of Connect Four. She was becoming more alert.

But as time went on, the van Ryn family became concerned.

Some things seemed to come back to Laura, but other comments the family made didn't make much sense to her. Then one day, Laura was told to write her name on a piece of paper. To everyone's shock, the young lady in the hospital bed wrote the name "Whitney Cerak."

Laura van Ryn and Whitney Cerak looked remarkably alike. They had similar builds, facial features, and straight blond hair, and the injuries their bodies sustained in the accident made it difficult to tell the two girls apart. In the hours after the highway collision, the coroner confused the girl who had died with the one who had lived.

This scene is almost too surreal to imagine. Whitney's family had even visited with the van Ryn family at the hospital, not knowing that they were looking at their own daughter covered in IVs and tubes. They were right there in her presence, staring her in the eyes, but they didn't know it was their sweet daughter Whitney! When they finally learned the truth, they were shocked that they had been with their own daughter and not known it.

So many emotions go through my heart when I think about this incident (including deep sadness for the van Ryns). If only Whitney's family had known she was alive, they would have had peace in their distress. If only they had recognized their daughter as they stared at her in the



hospital, their sadness would have turned into gladness. If only they had known it was her. It was a grave case of mistaken identity.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Disciples Didn't See Jesus*

The disciples also faced a case of mistaken identity that brought them much grief. They could not grasp the identity of Jesus as the sovereign ruler of the universe. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, they don't seem to understand that Jesus is the King of the world. He is the one who holds the whole cosmos in his hands. Their failure to accurately identify Jesus leads them to fear, anxiety, and worry. In Mark 6 we see the climax of their ignorance. It was evening at the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus had just miraculously fed over five thousand people. The disciples ministered with Jesus at the feeding, but then he sent them away so he could dismiss the crowd himself. Perhaps he wanted to keep his disciples from getting swayed by the crowd's expectation of a political messiah whom they surmised would bring the promised kingdom by military force (John 6:14–15).

The Israelites had been exploited by Rome and faced heavy taxes and military oppression. As Jesus performed his miracles, messianic expectations were at an all-time high, and people began to wonder if this was the king they were waiting for. But Jesus did not come for an earthly revolution—he came for a heavenly one. He came not to kill but to die. He quickly gets his disciples away from the crowd so they don't fall prey to these political expectations. The best place to send them is on a boat across the northern part of the lake to Bethsaida. At the same time Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray (Mark 6:46).

The disciples were making their way across the sea when a storm came upon them. These professional sailors were having a rough night, soaked by the big waves and beaten down by the strong winds and darkness. Even in poor conditions the Sea of Galilee could normally be crossed during the night, but the disciples were helpless against the hard wind blowing against them.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, during the fourth watch of the night (between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m.), Jesus came walking toward them on the water! By this point the men had been wrestling with the brutal storm for hours. What would the disciples expect to happen next? Jesus would save them, right? Jesus to the rescue! But what Jesus did is rather puzzling. He was walking on the water . . . and he meant to pass by them. *What?* Wasn't Jesus walking on the water in order to save the disciples? Wasn't Jesus coming to them to protect them from the storm? Relieve them from distress? Surely Jesus wasn't simply out for a midnight stroll on the lake. He wasn't trying to race the disciples to the other side. What was he doing?

The question is not whether Jesus wanted to help the disciples. Of course he did. The better question is, *how* did Jesus want to help the disciples? What did he want to help them with? Jesus could have stopped the storm in an instant, but he was not concerned with helping the disciples make a timely arrival to Bethsaida. He wanted something bigger than that. He wanted the disciples to understand that he was (and is!) in control over the entire universe. He wanted to reveal his character to them.

The disciples could not get it. They thought he was a ghost. Over and over again in the Gospels the disciples watched Jesus perform miracles, heal the hurting, preach

incredible sermons, and care for the poor—yet they failed to recognize the very Son of God. Their case of mistaken identity allowed them to entertain fearful thoughts and anxious worries. If only they had known that the man in their midst was the eternal Son of God in the flesh. If only they had known just how powerful and merciful he is—things would have been different on that stormy night on the sea.

### *Jesus Is the Sovereign Ruler*

Jesus did indeed have a purpose in his nighttime stroll on the lake. He meant to pass by his disciples to show them he was the Son of God by explicitly pointing them back to the Old Testament. On Mount Sinai the transcendent Lord “passed before” Moses in order to reveal his name and compassion (Ex. 34:5–6). Later, on that same mountain, the Lord revealed his presence to Elijah in passing him by (1 Kings 19:11). On the Sea of Galilee Jesus was revealing himself to his disciples. They were supposed to see him and make the connection: Jesus is God.<sup>3</sup>

This was no illusion. Jesus literally walked on water. Job 9 says that there is an awesome separation between God and humanity. Only God can stretch out the heavens, only God can move mountains, and only God can tread on the waves of the sea. One commentator on Mark writes, “In walking on the water toward the disciples, Jesus walks where only God can walk. As in the forgiveness of sins (2:10) and in his power over nature (4:39), walking on the lake identifies Jesus unmistakably with God.”<sup>4</sup> The act of walking on water meant Jesus is God in the flesh. There was to be no confusion about Jesus’s identity.

When he “meant to pass by them,” Jesus intended to make the fact of his divinity crystal clear to his disciples. And if that were not enough, Jesus yells out to his men, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” It’s the exact same identification God gives when he discloses himself in Exodus 3 to Moses. Jesus takes God’s name. He not only walks on water as only God can, but he also takes God’s name. Jesus is telling his disciples, “I know you’re going through a great trial right now, don’t fear, take heart, *I am* here.”<sup>5</sup>

The disciples let their fear overwhelm them, and it blinded them to the Savior who was right in front of them. Why didn’t the disciples get it? Why were they clueless? Mark explains the diagnosis in Mark 6:52: “They did not understand about the loaves.” The point of the miraculous feeding of more than five thousand people from a few loaves and fish was so that the disciples (and others present) would know that Jesus is the Bread of life, the Giver of all things. But rather than seeing Jesus as the Son of God who could provide everything they needed, the disciples failed to connect the dots. Jesus created bread from grain that never grew. He created fish that had never lived or swam or been caught by a net. He created this food out of nothing, and the crowd ate, and the people were satisfied. They ate as much as they wanted to eat. The disciples were in awe of the sheer abundance of food, but they missed the one who made the food.

I often wonder what the Twelve were thinking as they walked up and down the Galilean countryside handing out more and more bread that Jesus had made. What would be going through their minds as they came back with baskets full of leftovers? Surely they would have been stunned that Jesus had taken a few fish and a little bread and fed a crowd

with more left over. However, it is easy for followers of Christ to experience the miraculous work of Christ in our midst, and then moments later doubt whether he will continue working among us. Jesus can be with us in one trial, but then at the very next one we “strain at the oars,” wondering if he is going to do anything about it. I don’t think we are any different from the disciples. How quickly we forget the identity of Jesus!

We will face trials and be tempted to doubt the sovereignty of Jesus. We should note that on the sea the disciples were not being scolded for being disobedient. They were doing exactly what Jesus told them to do. They were struggling with the waves because they were being obedient. The disciples were exactly where Jesus wanted them: in the middle of the angry waves of a storm. Why would a God of mercy and love and compassion do this? Precisely because he loved them so much. The disciples needed to recognize who Jesus is and to rely on him. If they understood who Jesus really is, they would be able to trust him in every storm. Jesus wanted to wake them up from the stupor of a case of mistaken identity.

### *We Mistake Christ’s Identity*

In the midst of storms in your life, have you forgotten who Jesus is? Do you doubt whether God intended for you to be in the storm-tossed boat in the first place? Do you understand about the provision of Christ himself as seen in the abundance of the loaves? Do you take courage in the fact that Jesus is who he claims to be? When you remember Jesus, does your fear vanish?

When we understand who Christ is (the sustenance-provider and storm-controller), we will have peace in the