

Surviving Suffering Like a Champ

When a friend challenged me to a reading contest on Goodreads a couple of years ago, I was reluctant. Did I really want my reading selections broadcast on the internet for friends and strangers to see? Despite this qualm, my arm was twisted, and I began recording the books I read, often giving them a starred rating based on how much I liked the book.

Let me be clear: I'm rather stingy with my five-star ratings. A book really must speak to or move me before I will give it such high marks. Yet as I think back on the books that I have given a five-star ranking to, a common theme stands out: suffering.

Suffering may seem like a gloom and doom topic, especially during this time of year when everything is supposed to be joyous and bright. Yet during the holiday season is when many of us most struggle with suffering, whether it comes through the need that comes with the loss of a job, or the loneliness that results from a broken relationship or death, or the sadness of hurts and memories from past seasonal gatherings that rear their ugly heads. And how we deal with suffering in our own lives is what makes or breaks us as individuals.

Take just a moment to peer at my bookshelf of five-star favorites. Here, we see the suffering of [*Jane Eyre*](#), in which Charlotte Bronte's title character experiences painful loss and physical hardship because she believes it necessary to remain true to her principles. Next to it stands Lee Strobel's [*The Case for Christ*](#), which reveals the historical and academic evidence for the physical and mental sufferings of the one who gave birth to the largest religion in the world. [*Pandemia*](#) was recently added to this five-star shelf, and in this latest book from former *New York Times* reporter

Alex Berenson, we see more clearly the sufferings of the COVID-19 pandemic that have been inflicted upon all of us through the dictates of our leaders and bureaucrats. And finally, [*A Path Through Suffering*](#) and [*The Path of Loneliness*](#), both by the late author and speaker Elisabeth Elliot, demonstrate ways to overcome hurt and pain.

It's this last author who has particularly amazed me this year. Elliot, a well-educated linguist, was the wife of Jim Elliot, who was martyred in the 1950s along with four other missionary men by the tribe of natives they were trying to minister to in the jungles of South America. Their story reached mainstream America via Elliot's biography of the men and continued through *Life* magazine's photo essay on Elliot's later life working among the very tribe who murdered her husband. The many works Elliot wrote on suffering emerged not only from this tragedy, but also through other losses, such as the death of her second husband from cancer.


When going through suffering, it's easy to dismiss the help and advice of others with the thought that they have no idea what they're talking about. But with Elliot, the case is different. She went through loss, through suffering, through pain, through loneliness. And instead of frantically seeking to push hurt aside and fill the painful void in our lives with other things, she counsels us to look up and find "a refuge for our loneliness" in God.

"To stop our frantic getting, spending, and searching," she says in *The Path of Loneliness*, "and simply to look at the things God has made is to move one step away from despair. For God cares."

If anyone had cause for bitterness over the loss and pain she endured, it was Elliot. Yet she tells us that "it is possible both to accept and to endure loneliness [and by extension, all forms of suffering]." How do we do so? Elliot gives us the answer:

“In circumstances for which there is no final answer in the world, we have two choices: accept them as God’s wise and loving choice for our blessing (this is called faith), or resent them as proof of His indifference, His carelessness, even His non-existence (this is unbelief).”

Elliot obviously chose the first option, explaining that she accepts her suffering as a gift from God, and then gives it back to him as an offering in return. That’s a foreign concept in our society today, not only because we are encouraged to play the victim—even when receiving the smallest hurts and offenses—but because many Americans regularly relegate God to a corner of their lives, or not at all.

But what if we tried Elliot’s approach to suffering? Instead of continually bemoaning our troubles—both public and personal—what if we accepted them as a gift from God—a gift that, although painful at the time, could turn into beautiful character or other benefits further down the road? Doing so gives us a completely different lens to view the world through, and in a world that is increasingly broken and strewn with victims who only wallow in their suffering, a few individuals who choose to do the opposite will make a world of difference. 

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