

SUFFERING AND THE
COURAGE OF GOD

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Exploring How Grace and Suffering Meet



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PART ONE 
the challenge of suffering

INTRODUCTION
out of the prison

ODDLY ENOUGH, THE WAY OF OUT of my suffering came only when I accepted that there might be no way out of it—that I might have to live with the pain I was carrying for the rest of my life. Little did I realize the doors such acceptance might open.

Suffering can come in many forms, small and great. But how we deal with it begins with our response to whatever life presents us, from minor inconveniences to major tragedies. Life slowly taught me that the way we deal with each difficulty either intensifies the suffering or opens doors to its redemption. In my case, it took a great adversity to teach me how to deal with the small ones.

The suffering I faced in my mid-forties was emotional, but cripplingly real nonetheless. Behind the surface of an outwardly productive and seemingly successful life as a priest in a suburban Episcopal parish, a persistent low-grade pain hummed silently in the background of my soul, the bitter fruit of a childhood of periodic emotional scarring. My father's violent temper and my mother's alternating episodes of intense rage and expressive love had left deeper scars on my psyche than I had previously realized. I began to notice how much I was using my otherwise worthy activities as a pastor, husband, colleague, and friend—preaching, teaching, team projects, spiritual practice, interesting conversations, heartwarming films, good books, even friendship and marriage themselves—as ways to escape this pain. Every time I really came “home” to myself, there it was, quietly throbbing, sending me out once again to find some new diversion from the

discomfort. Not only that, but as my awareness of this background pain surfaced, I noticed how often it flared when I felt personally wounded by someone. What I had identified as periods of wanting to withdraw and close myself down now began painting themselves in more vivid colors as occasions when some outer event hit the raw wound of past emotional abuse, causing an overreaction to otherwise minor incidents. Each new venture gave me a soothing thrill of pleasure, but did little to heal the pain within.

This was all the more discouraging because I had already spent the decade of my thirties finding some relief from my own bipolar depressive illness, (a legacy from my mother's genes, and the unsuspected cause of her alternating moods).¹ That biologically based disease had been like a roller coaster, sending me reeling from the depths to the heights at least once a year. I had understood this as a personal, psychological flaw until receiving proper diagnosis and treatment. I'll discuss my recovery from that disease later on in this book, but for now suffice it to say that through the decade of that struggle I had hoped emotional turmoil would someday find a simple, peaceful resolution, and my suffering would cease. Now, it seemed, the gradual but real remission of the bipolar depression through therapy and medicine had merely cleared the ground for this deeper, underlying distress to emerge. I was now presented with a real psychological problem that had been hiding behind the disease.

I felt inwardly trapped. I had tried every "fix" available. Sadly, it seemed, I had run out of options. Maybe I would have to live with this hum of pain for the rest of my life. Would I do that? Could I do that?

The facts of my life were confronting me, not for the first time, with a harsh choice: Will you face the facts as they are, or will you keep trying to escape them? Do you have the courage to carry this pain to the grave, if need be, or will you spend your time mourning a healing that hasn't happened? Is the already significant good in your life satisfying enough to accept this persistent pain as one part of the total package? Can you live thankfully, enjoying what you have?

Being out of alternatives, this seemed an offer I couldn't refuse, so I said to myself, to life itself, and to God, "Okay, okay, okay. If that's the choice, I choose life, as it is, even though some part of me is still in the prison of this pain." Although I had made this choice, I found this question still dangling: *How* could I accept this pain without remaining its victim? Where could I find the courage to make this possible?

Paradoxically, it is often our unwillingness to accept the way things are that blocks any possibility of future change. Having accepted that I might live with this pain forever, I was soon invited to a fresh exploration of possibilities.

I had a dream: Trapped in a prison cell, I gripped the bars, looking into the mournful eyes of an abused, suffering Christ who stood just outside my cage. This was an absolutely stereotypical, stained-glass image of Jesus as archetypal victim: crown of thorns, red robe, patient, sad and long-suffering countenance.

My first response was to recoil. I was in the midst of rebellion against my own particular childhood image of Christ, which was based on a dark strain of Christian piety that sees suffering as a good thing, in and of itself. The abused child in me had identified with Jesus as the "good kid" who accepts his abuse patiently and passively. Jesus was the best kid ever. No wonder the bullies went after him, the archetypal scapegoat, the perfect victim. The particular strain of fundamentalism in which I was raised emphasized, perversely, that the greater the suffering, the greater the good for all—like the child in an abusive family, unconsciously targeted as the scapegoat, whose suffering benefits those who can unload their frustrations on him, rather than having to bear their own emotional turmoil. This had been the original, albeit unwitting, framework of meaning for my own suffering.

Something healthy in me had long since rejected this version of Jesus, finding in Scripture a more robust and life-giving person. So why was this abject figure standing in front of my prison cell? "Get me out of here," I begged. The mournful face broke into a kindly smile, and the eyes suddenly revealed a surprisingly strong resilience—a love that had courageously endured deep suffering,

yet not been undone by it. “The cell door isn’t really locked,” he said. “Go on, push it open. You can leave if you want to.” And then he disappeared. My dream self pushed on the cell door. It opened. I stood in the cell, astonished, wondering what to do next as I awoke.

No miracle cure came along with this dream, but I knew it was an invitation to learn how to deal with my suffering differently. The subtle transformation of Christ’s face from the sadness of suffering to the strength of courageous love invited me to see him in a new way. Somehow, the way out of the prison had to do with learning to see that suffering differently. What was Jesus’ own way of dealing with suffering?

I can’t claim to have penetrated the heart of God on this matter, but as I’ll soon relate, I came to see the suffering Christ not as a helpless victim but as a subtle victor, courageously engaged in a deep struggle against the power of any victimizing force to undo us. His suffering is not borne passively, but embraced actively by a love and life bigger than any suffering—God’s own eternally springing life, manifest in Christ, available to all, whether the external forms of adversity change or not. As I came to see this courageous Christ in a fresh light, I began both to realize and believe that all our sufferings are carried in an even bigger and stronger courage—God’s own courageous love. This vast life, from which we cannot be separated, enters into all the difficulties creatures face with abundant grace to help us overcome all the power that would trap us in a prison house of fear, resignation, and helplessness.

Astonished at the very idea that my own courage could be rooted in a courage as deep as God’s—an idea we will explore in more depth in the next chapter—I was able to embrace my inward hum of pain instead of running from it, working through it step by step in a healing process that has gone farther than I initially dared to imagine. While some inner scar tissue can be jolted into a dull hurting, the persistent low hum has long since departed.

This book comes out of many years of discovery and transformation that made me more compassionate with myself and those

to whom I minister, as we all seek the courage to face adversity in ways that lessen, rather than add to the suffering of the world. Everything I've written comes not only from what I learned in my own experience, but even more from hearing the stories of how other people deal courageously with their own difficulties. All this has changed the way I approach even minor annoyances. I hope the witness of these lives, and my own personal insights, may offer some help in opening the seemingly locked doors in others' lives.

CHAPTER ONE
when suffering comes

SUFFERING NEVER SAVED ANYBODY. Not your suffering. Not mine. Not even Jesus' suffering saves, in and of itself. Rather, so far as I have seen it in my own experience and that of others, it is the *way* suffering is faced that makes the difference between whether pain, sorrow, difficulty, deprivation, or challenge becomes part of our self's stretching or shrinking. Suffering is a challenge—a gauntlet thrown in our path. When faced with adversity, we must make a choice.

One family is sideswiped by the unexpected birth of a child with a catastrophic handicap, and everyone draws together in mutual support. After the inevitable shock and grief, they decide to accept the cards dealt to them by circumstance, and embrace this child, with all its difficulties. In so doing, their hearts are stretched: "It's changed our expectations about what's important in life," the father says.

Another couple greets an infant with an even lesser handicap with a resistant bitterness. So set are they on their expectations of happiness that this unwanted accident of nature cannot be absorbed. "It's like our lives were supposed to end up in southern California and we got hijacked to the Arctic Circle! We don't want to be in this situation. It wasn't what we had our hearts set on." The baby is put in an institution, but the wound to the dream endures, unhealed. Eventually the couple separates, their marriage relationship too strained to bear the enormity of this whiplash.

We don't have to believe that God causes suffering—and I don't—to recognize that adversity can put us into what the Bible

calls “the Test”—that crucible of choice that tests our mettle and demands life-changing decisions.² Life, sooner or later, is difficult for every person—not all the time, but from time to time, even for those in fortunate circumstances.³ Those difficult times do, indeed, test our mettle. In them character is formed or weakened. Like it or not, this is the way life sometimes is.

Both families faced shock, disappointment, grief, and understandable railing against their fate. But the way they dealt with their suffering was quite different. While both couples deserve our sympathy and compassionate understanding, it is clear that the outcomes were very different because the choices made were different.

The word “suffering” may bring to mind dramatic events, like car accidents, life threatening disease, natural disaster, or personal injury. But how we deal with suffering begins with how we choose to respond to the stuff of any ordinary day. The yolks may break as I am preparing sunny-side up eggs for breakfast; I may get stuck in a traffic jam; phone calls and e-mails may conspire to keep me from doing my work; my spouse may be in a bad mood when I get home; and the light bulb in the reading lamp may burn out just as I am finally settling down to read the daily paper. Each of these events is potentially a moment of suffering, depending on how we deal with it. There are people who are able to turn the ordinary inconveniences of everyday life into major occasions for misery. Others seem able to bear with life’s rough edges in a way that deepens their resilience and softens the rough edges of their souls—their essential selves. The quality of daily life is made more sweet or sour by how we deal with every such occurrence. Over a lifetime, these daily habits actually shape how we see the world.

lamenters or life-embracers?

We’ve all known people who become hardened and embittered by their difficulties or disabilities. In my first year of ministry I took home communions to over thirty elderly shut-ins each month. Some of them were stuck, miserable, victims of their circumstances. Their chief lament was how unsympathetic people were to their

plight; but sympathy, no matter how constant, seemed to disappear into a bottomless pit. Much as one might have compassion for them, their continual complaints had become off-putting to friends and family alike.

In my youthful inexperience I wondered, fearfully, if this bitterness was what old age threatened for all of us. I was saved from this conclusion by another group of shut-ins, equally challenged, who spoke in simple acceptance of their limitations and with quiet gratitude about their lives. I came to learn that they had undergone deep inner struggle to find acceptance and gratitude, passing through their own moments of resistance, nights of anger, days of sorrow, and bursts of outrage, coming to final acceptance and, with it, the power to live gracefully, embracing life as it came to them.

The life circumstances of the situation-resistant lamenters had not been significantly different from those of the quietly thankful life-embracers. Both suffered, but in wholly different worlds. The thankful ones saw life as a series of challenges to be faced. Adversity was something to be accepted, dealt with, lived through, learned from, and redeemed. The victims saw life as a tale of repeated, undeserved woe. Beset and besieged in a world of endless trials foisted upon them by the mysterious malignity of life itself, they had shrunk into private, inner hells. For most of their lives they had met every difficulty with resistance, persistent resentment, and accumulating outrage.

Suffering, in and of itself, can be an easy route through outrage to evil. Embittered by suffering, we may begin to lash out at others. I suffer, so why should you be happy? You do me an injury, so I strike back. Your ancestors were unjust to mine; I live in resentment, waiting for revenge.

Such struggles are the most difficult moments of human life. We're pushed, sometimes brutally, up against the rough edges of our own souls. The heart and mind can be stunned, shaken, and thrown into a terrible crisis of meaning. We may discover emotional depths and attitudes we never imagined we had. Tough inner choices are demanded. Will we hide? Face the situation? Succumb to guilt? Be swept away by fear? Hate life? Blame God?

I know from my own harsh struggles with depression and emotional pain that it's not the place of anyone outside the skin of the afflicted person to judge people harshly who succumb to the bitterness of suffering. We can't know what's going on in the mystery of their hearts—what childhood fears or adult beliefs, inner emotional pits or intellectual barriers keep them from facing their suffering differently. I know from the many times I've postponed dealing with a difficulty how powerful such inner forces can be, and I cannot afford to deliver ultimate judgments about anyone else.

But the brute fact of life is that different choices mean different outcomes. Those who survive and grow more resilient in times of suffering have found the spiritual resources of acceptance, endurance, and patience to deal with their trials, whatever the outcome. Such acceptance often leads to gratitude and compassion. They face life with enlarged hearts.

So much depends on which state of heart and mind meets, endures, and responds to the adversity. Do we undergo it as a prison house of assaults and betrayals, or do we somehow find a more spacious inner state that reaches out for the goodness of life in spite of the suffering?

The first time I saw this dramatically lived out was in a woman in her late seventies, to whom life had dealt a terrible blow. The person I'll call Myrtle had good reasons for her resentments. Her son, her only son whom she loved, had died tragically in mid-life, leaving behind a wife and family. Distraught with grief, Myrtle had "lost consciousness" while driving to church one dreary Sunday morning and rammed her car into a telephone pole. Miraculously, she survived life-threatening injuries, and after three months of hospital recovery, was home. Only one problem lingered: occasional shooting pains in her leg. But to make matters worse, her husband had developed a painful case of shingles just at the moment she needed his help. Her exasperation at him was only making his condition worse. The inner walls of victimhood were closing in. After a quiet tirade about every aspect of her existence, including her husband's betrayal of her through his illness, she

blinked, looked at me, and asked tremulously, “Do you think I’m becoming a terrible harpy?”

Well, truth be told, she was, most of all to her unfortunate husband. I blinked, swallowed hard, and sent off an inward prayer for guidance. What should I, as a pastor, say to this poor, life-battered woman? Murmur sympathy, as I had for months, or tell her the honest truth? I followed the guidance that came back in answer to my prayer: As gently as possible, I told her that she was, indeed, headed straight for harpydom. I said I understood she had lots of good reasons for it, and that no one could blame her if she did. But did she really want to end up in that kind of inner hell, however good the causes for it might be?

Tearfully, she confessed that she felt terrible about her complaining spirit. But what was she to do, especially with this continuing pain? My inner prayers for guidance became intensified, and I heard myself saying, “Well, Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and bless those who curse us. The pain is now a deadly enemy of your soul, not just your body. Every time it comes, why don’t you bless it instead of cursing it?” I myself had been pondering Jesus’ challenge in the Sermon on the Mount, to “bless, not curse” recently, about a wholly different matter, and, as it turned out, by the grace of God the idea was ready at hand in that moment for Myrtle’s situation.⁴

Grace of God or not, part of me was horrified to face this poor, suffering woman with such a rigorous demand. Yet that was what had come in answer to my prayer, so, reluctantly, I said it. To my everlasting surprise and relief, Myrtle gasped, sat up straight, dried her eyes, pursed her lips in thought for a minute and then said, quite matter-of-factly, “Very well, then; that’s what I’ll do.” And so she did. She arose, cared for her husband, and blessed her pain, which slowly receded over the coming weeks. Most importantly, her spirits turned toward accepting her life as it was, with blessing rather than cursing. In the midst of suffering, she had ceased to be its victim.

redemptive suffering—or suffering redemptively?

Christians often speak loosely about “*redemptive suffering*,” as if suffering itself had some curative value. Suffering itself was not ennobling Myrtle, but embittering her.

It is more helpful, I believe, to speak of *suffering redemptively*. By this I mean facing suffering with a courage and compassion that can clear our minds for creative responses to adversity. This is not a mere quibble over words. The way we speak of things shapes our beliefs and expectations. To call suffering itself redemptive is to suggest that just to experience adversity, pain, abuse, and oppression contains some hidden divine energy for good.

Life had faced Myrtle with a choice about how she would respond to the harsh side of existence. Encouraged to trust in the wisdom of Jesus, she chose to face her sufferings differently. Rather than letting the suffering define or rule her, she called upon a resource from beyond the suffering: the power of blessing, which began to transform her experience. She learned how to suffer redemptively, instead of expecting that suffering itself would “make her better.”

There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that Jesus ever deliberately sought suffering, or encouraged others to seek it. Indeed, he seems to do everything possible to alleviate it: healing the sick, forgiving troubled sinners, reconciling the outcast, and comforting the sorrowful, challenging the powers of oppression. Adversaries begin to stalk him, yes: Slanders from fearful opponents are hurled, and a growing threat of arrest looms over him. But this opposition is because his zeal for the burning vision of the kingdom—the rule of God’s grace in human life—makes him the enemy of all that causes unnecessary suffering, inwardly or outwardly. That opposition will lead to the suffering of the cross, and yet on the verge of his arrest, he still prays “earnestly” to be delivered from that ordeal if there is another way to accomplish God’s purposes for his life. By the time he rises from his prayer, he is able to approach what seems like crushing defeat in such a way that it becomes a path to victory.

Making this distinction between Christ's redemptive way of meeting suffering and suffering itself is crucial. Psychological health and spiritual wholeness demand a refusal to choose the path of helplessness and victimhood—even if we are actually being victimized. That path opens us to a dark, masochistic undercurrent that many forms of spirituality cultivate by seeing a spiritual power in pain itself.

Primitive beliefs all over the world see self-inflicted punishment as a way to get the attention of the Spirit or spirits. The more pain the better. The priests of Ba'al, in their contest with Elijah on Mount Carmel, "cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them."⁵ Various shamanic ceremonies involve self-inflicted pain to raise spiritual energy. Celtic Christian monks stood waist-deep in cold winter water, and countless thousands of medieval Christians wore hair shirts, lashed themselves with whips, or mixed ashes in their food to subdue the passions of the flesh and "share the sufferings" of Christ.

"Sharing in Christ's sufferings" is not about self-inflicted pain, whatever use such practices may have in toughening the body and refining the whole self. We share in Christ's sufferings when we pursue, in spite of opposition, his vision of the kingdom, God's desire for earthly life, when we participate in Christ's way of meeting suffering and its sources. We also follow the way of the cross when we meet the natural adversities of the world—sickness, hardship, adversity—in the Spirit that Christ manifests. This means facing any adversity, whatever its cause, emulating Christ's way of suffering redemptively.

facing the opposition within

That way involves facing not only the adversity that attacks from outside us, but the resistance that arises from within us. When life does not go as we expect it to, frustration, impatience, and disappointment may be our first and natural reaction. But if we do not work with things as they are, such reactions may deepen into

resentment and a feeling of helplessness. With repeated disappointments, self-pity and even self-loathing may set in.

It's even possible to begin subtly enjoying the "secondary gains" that may accrue to the sufferer: special attention, some lessening of ordinary demands. We may find, however unconsciously, positive advantages in the familiar companionship of suffering.

A friend I'll call Valerie realized how far she'd gone down this beguiling path when she was healed from the partial immobility imposed by the severe bursitis in her right shoulder. Medical treatments had failed to relieve the problem. Right-handed, Valerie learned how to use her left hand for most tasks. Not consciously happy about her condition at all, she faced her handicap with good humor, making do with her left hand when she could, and asking for help when she couldn't.

One day a friend offered to take her to a prayer meeting being led by a "remarkable healer." Valerie dismissed the invitation at first. She wasn't interested in anything "fringe" or "far out," and was a bit skeptical about allegedly remarkable healers. Still, if it might help . . . So she went—and was healed!

Astonished and joyful, she returned to her ordinary tasks. A couple of days after the healing, putting groceries away pleasantly with her right hand on the top shelf, she "was hit by a wave of grief that stopped me in my tracks. I actually missed my disability, as if I had lost my closest companion. More startlingly, part of me wanted it back." A bit baffled, she noted her reaction, realized she faced an inner resistance to her healing, chose not to accept its invitation, and continued putting the groceries away, thankful for her recovery.

Each "small" step like Valerie's we take in dealing with our sufferings bravely is a victory, making us more fit to cope with this life, and more able to participate in the world-redeeming life and love of God that surrounds us, and into which, I believe, we continue to grow after death. By resisting the dark current of masochism and the cultivation of secondary gain which can imprison us in victimhood, she tasted in her own small way Christ's path of victory.

Christ—abused victim or courageous warrior?

It took me a long time to see how that victory was won. Certainly Easter Sunday came every year, and with it trumpet blasts of victory, but it always seemed strangely disconnected from Good Friday. On that dark day, I saw the Righteous One being beaten up by evil opponents. Then, two days later, the whole thing got mysteriously reversed, as if in reward for all his suffering. Somehow the suffering was supposed to be good, something God in fact willed to save us.

Nowhere did I see a Christ whose *way* of dealing with the rejection, betrayal, and pain of the Cross was victorious, itself a foreshadowing of the Easter triumph—a way of resilience rather than resignation, of courage and resistance to evil rather than blind submission to mystery. The Cross was presented as redemptive suffering itself, rather than as a clue to suffering redemptively. As I have already noted in the Introduction, I had been raised to see Christ as the battered Victim whose passive acceptance of abuse mysteriously redeems the world. In talking to many others over the years, I do not think I am alone in such impressions.⁶ When I quipped once that I was baffled by why people didn't sit at the front of the church, a woman joked, "It's because of that cross up there. Nobody wants to get close to it." The good news of Jesus' triumphant way *through* suffering hadn't gotten through to her.

Slowly, over the years, a very different image of Christ has emerged from my pondering and praying, beginning with a very distinct inward vision during a Palm Sunday service the year my rebellion against Christ as the innocent, abused "good kid" reached its zenith. As I sat in church listening to the tale of the silent Jesus standing in the midst of his abusive enemies, I felt so sickened I seriously considered walking out on this apparent cult of pain and sorrow. How could this man be an example to anyone of health, healing, and salvation?

Instead of fleeing the church service, I fled to the inmost depths of my heart, and prayed for illumination. The answer came swift

and clear: I saw the vast expanse of the starry sky, and these words echoed deep in my mind: “The one who has the midnight sky in his heart need fear no man.” Then I inwardly saw Jesus standing silently before Pilate, and realized that the midnight sky was in his own heart, just as it can be in ours. He was not standing passively accepting abuse, but nobly, without fear, facing his enemy with courage and compassion, larger in soul than his opponents *because he was rooted in a goodness deeper than the suffering*. Even in the midst of suffering, the taproot of his spirit was deeply anchored in the goodness of God. I realized in that moment that this was a clue to Jesus’ secret of facing life in this wild, wonderful, and terribly difficult universe.

Because Christ knows intimately the indestructible life of God within him, he can find the bravery to bear up under the worst that life can hurl at him, opening the darkest places of human life to the light of God. This God-rootedness makes it possible for him to find the courage and compassion to face the wilderness and the demons, the diseases and the betrayals, the fears and foes, and finally the dark realm of the dead itself, allowing the life of God itself to bear him up, bear him through. Even death itself is not to be feared, because every circumstance, whatever the cause, is a potential portal to the eternal reality of God’s love which surrounds and sustains our own small lives.

This insight was reinforced on Good Friday as I read Psalm 22, traditionally associated with Christ, in which the sufferer’s bones are out of joint, his hands pierced, his spirit poured out like water. Most amazingly, in the midst of all this suffering, he remembers the goodness of his mother’s breast: “[I]t was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.”⁷ In the midst of agony, the sufferer stays connected to a sense of goodness, rather than being pulled into the terrible vortex of fear, anger, helplessness, and grief that swirls in his heart. The suffering is met, received, and held in a heart still in touch with a goodness as deep and vast as the midnight sky.

finding the courage to care

This surrounding, sustaining goodness comes to us through many channels, for it is the divine grace itself. A caring friend takes under his wing a professional colleague who is battling emotional demons, listening to him over a weekly lunch. Fellow church members make sure an elderly widow is not left alone, setting up a group to read books to her. Someone practicing “random acts of kindness” gives a tollhouse cookie to a parkway toll agent who, unbeknownst to the giver, is having the worst day of his life—a simple act of human caring that turns him away from the brink of despair.

Or such goodness may come through the inner illuminations that arise through spiritual practice—darts of love that penetrate the confusion and complexity of our inner world with an image, or word, or insight that reorients us to life’s goodness and expands the roominess of our world, a world that is always and everywhere overarched and overshadowed by the “midnight sky” of God’s life and love. In later chapters, we’ll discuss ways of cultivating this sense of goodness.

Being grounded, goodness is the basis for the courage we need to face adversity, for courage can arise only when we care about something enough to defend and protect it—in this case, the love of life itself and our willingness to invest ourselves in it. Only so can we survive suffering, and if possible, seek ways to cure or challenge its causes.

A suffering world is not saved by agonizing over it. That only adds to the suffering. The world is saved by love of the good and the bravery to preserve and increase it, by a courageous compassion that faces adversity and moves forward, looking for whatever goodness is possible in any situation. Jesus faces the evil actions of his opponents—and his own inner opposition—like a martial arts master in combat, like a doctor wrestling with cancer, or a therapist up against a patient’s suicidal impulse: alert, caring, nimble, and savvy to outfox and outwit the dark enemies of life’s goodness with sanity, compassion, and confidence in the power of

the good to endure and triumph. His wounds are not the sign that suffering is good, but that some things in life are good enough to suffer for. They are the wounds of a brave warrior bloodied in the fight to free those who have gotten lost in the prison house of suffering, as we will see further in Chapter Two.

Christ's way of suffering redemptively models the courage that can grow us strong, caring, and supple as we face any adversity. For Christ, for us, and for everyone who has found such courage in the midst of adversity, the source of victory is the same: God's own courage in the midst of a world of dazzling beauty, soul-sustaining goodness, and sometimes terrifying adversity.

For a way to open yourself to the "midnight sky" of God's love and simply being present to God, see Prayer Exercises 1 and 2 in the Appendix.

CHAPTER TWO
the courage of God

IF COURAGE ITSELF BEGINS IN THE HEART

of God, then finding our connection to it can empower us as we face difficulty, danger, or simple daily challenges in the wildly magnificent beauty, challenge, and possibility of this world. We do not usually think of God as needing courage. Isn't God too big and powerful, the source, creator, and sustainer of all that is? Surely, God has absolute mastery and control. What need is there for courage?

And yet, many biblical stories that witness to how divine grace works imply courage again and again. God is pictured in the roles of creator, parent, lover, and warrior, each of which involves risk-taking—which, in turn, requires courage.

The Bible uses down-to-earth stories to talk about God, rather than some direct, clinical description of the Mystery that underlies all reality. Each tale reveals different qualities of the divine presence in the world: the healing love that cures a leper, the justice that overthrows an oppressive ruler, the endurance that sustains the suffering poor, and the companionship that embraces the solitary sufferer. These divine attributes are then celebrated in prayer and song, such as Psalm 145's declaration that "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."⁸

The usual list of divine attributes is a familiar one: love, justice, compassion, forgiveness, creativity, and caring, to name but a few. Courage has not, traditionally, been on the list. But it's there silently, like gravity in the universe, fundamental to all else. "Courage is the foundation that underlies and gives reality to all