

SAVAGE MERCIES

# The Theology of Suffering Reading Guide

---

15 essential books to transform how you think about pain,  
sovereignty, and hope

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be  
comforted."*

— Matthew 5:4

# Why This Guide Exists

---

You're holding this because something hurts. Or because you love someone who's hurting. Or because you're a thinker who refuses to accept shallow answers about why a good God allows suffering.

Good. Shallow answers are worse than no answers.

This guide curates **15 books** from the best Reformed theologians, pastors, and thinkers who have wrestled with suffering — not as an academic exercise, but as people who lived it. Sproul lost his health. Calvin buried friends to plague. Lewis buried his wife. Boston buried most of his children.

They didn't write about suffering from a distance. They wrote from inside it. That's why their words still land.

*"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

— C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

**How to use this guide:** We've organized the books into four categories based on what you need right now. Start where you are — not where you think you should be. If you're in acute pain, skip to "Pastoral Comfort." If you want to understand the theology, start with "Start Here." If you're ready for the deep end, go to "Advanced Study."

Every book here shaped our **Suffering & Sovereignty** article series at Savage Mercies. Read the articles free at **savagemercies.com**.

# Start Here

---

*New to Reformed theology on suffering? These three books will give you a solid foundation without requiring seminary training.*

## Surprised by Suffering

R.C. Sproul

The single best entry point. Sproul writes with pastoral warmth about why Christians suffer, what the Bible actually says about it, and how to endure without losing your faith. Short, clear, and deeply comforting. If you read one book from this list, make it this one.

**BEGINNER**

## The Problem of Pain

C.S. Lewis

Lewis tackles the logical problem of evil head-on: if God is good and all-powerful, why does suffering exist? Written with his trademark clarity and intellectual honesty. A masterclass in making complex theology accessible. Pair it with *A Grief Observed* (next page) for the full picture — theory meets reality.

**BEGINNER**

## How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil

D.A. Carson

Carson examines suffering from multiple biblical angles — the mystery of evil, the limits of human understanding, the purposes of God in pain. Theologically rigorous but pastorally sensitive. Especially strong on helping you think through the hard questions without landing in despair or denial.

**BEGINNER**

*"The great thing to remember is that though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not."*

— C.S. Lewis

# Pastoral Comfort

---

*If you're in pain right now, these books won't lecture you. They'll sit with you.*

## **A Grief Observed**

C.S. Lewis

Written in the raw days after his wife's death from cancer. This is Lewis with the mask off — angry, confused, questioning God. It reads like a journal because it was one. If you've ever wondered whether a Christian is "allowed" to feel what you're feeling, this book gives you permission.

**BEGINNER**

## **A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament**

Michael Card

The church has largely forgotten how to lament — how to bring our pain, anger, and confusion to God honestly. Card recovers this lost practice from the Psalms and shows how lament is not a crisis of faith but the deepest expression of it.

**BEGINNER**

## **The Crook in the Lot**

Thomas Boston (1676–1732)

A Puritan pastor who buried six of his twelve children writes about how God uses affliction. The title comes from Ecclesiastes 7:13 — "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" Old language, timeless wisdom. Every sentence costs something.

**INTERMEDIATE**

*"He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces."*

— Isaiah 25:8

# Go Deeper

---

Ready for serious theological engagement? These books will stretch you.

## **Institutes of the Christian Religion (Book III, Chapters 8–9)**

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Calvin's chapters on "bearing the cross" and "meditation on the future life" are among the most powerful things ever written on Christian suffering. He argues that the cross is not an interruption of the Christian life — it *is* the Christian life. You don't need to read all 1,500 pages. Just Book III, chapters 8–9. That's roughly 40 pages that will rewire how you think about pain.

INTERMEDIATE

## **The Message of Lamentations**

Christopher J.H. Wright

A verse-by-verse study of the Bible's most brutally honest book. Wright shows how Lamentations gives the suffering church a vocabulary for pain that doesn't require pretending. Essential for anyone processing communal grief, national disaster, or the suffering of others.

INTERMEDIATE

## **Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible**

Joel Beeke (General Editor)

Not a book about suffering per se, but the single best study Bible for Reformed theology. Beeke's notes throughout the text consistently address themes of sovereignty, suffering, and providence. The doctrinal summaries at the end of each book are worth the price alone. Our most-cited source across the entire Suffering & Sovereignty series.

INTERMEDIATE

## **From Suffering to Glory (Romans 8:18–39)**

R.C. Sproul (Sermon Series)

Sproul's exposition of Romans 8 — the greatest chapter in the Bible on the relationship between suffering and glory. Available as a free teaching series from Ligonier Ministries ([ligonier.org](http://ligonier.org)). If you want to understand Romans 8:28 beyond the bumper sticker version, start here.

INTERMEDIATE

# Advanced Study

---

*For theological students, pastors, and serious readers who want the full picture.*

## **The Crucified God**

Jürgen Moltmann

Moltmann's landmark work argues that the cross is not just the means of salvation — it reveals who God *is*. God is not distant from suffering; He enters into it. A challenging, paradigm-shifting read that will fundamentally change how you understand the relationship between God and pain. Note: Moltmann is not Reformed, but his Trinitarian theology of the cross is indispensable.

**ADVANCED**

## **The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination**

Lorraine Boettner

If you want to understand the sovereignty of God — the doctrine that undergirds everything else on this list — Boettner's classic is the clearest systematic treatment available. Chapter by chapter, he builds the case that God's absolute sovereignty is not the enemy of comfort but the foundation of it.

**ADVANCED**

## **Redemption Accomplished and Applied**

John Murray

Murray explains how Christ's suffering accomplishes your redemption and how that redemption is applied to your life through sanctification — including suffering. Dense but devastating. The chapter on sanctification explains why suffering is not a detour from God's plan for you but part of the road.

**ADVANCED**

*"The cross is not simply a lovely example of sacrificial love. Theologically understood, what happened on that cross is nothing less than God taking on Himself the totality and consequence of human sin."*

— R.C. Sproul

# Scripture Reading Plan: Suffering & Sovereignty

A 14-day reading plan through the Bible's most important passages on suffering. Read one passage per day with the corresponding reflection question.

DAY	PASSAGE	THEME	REFLECTION QUESTION
1	Job 1-2	Sovereignty over suffering	What does Satan need God's permission to do?
2	Job 38-42:6	God's answer from the whirlwind	Does God explain Job's suffering? What does He do instead?
3	Psalms 13	Honest prayer in suffering	What does David ask God that you've been afraid to ask?
4	Psalms 22	Messianic suffering	How does this psalm point to the cross?
5	Psalms 88	The darkest psalm	This psalm has no resolution. Why is it in the Bible?
6	Lamentations 3:1-33	Hope in the ruins	Where does hope appear? How long before it arrives?
7	Isaiah 53	The suffering servant	What did Christ's suffering accomplish for you?
8	Matthew 27:32-56	The crucifixion	Why did the Father turn His face away?
9	Romans 5:1-11	Suffering produces hope	What is the chain from suffering to character to hope?
10	Romans 8:18-39	Nothing separates us	What can separate you from God's love? What can't?
11	2 Corinthians 1:3-11	The God of all comfort	How does your suffering equip you to comfort others?
12	2 Corinthians 4:7-18	Light momentary affliction	How can Paul call beatings and prison "light"?
13	2 Corinthians 12:7-10	Paul's thorn	What does "My grace is sufficient" mean in your situation?
14	Revelation 21:1-8	No more tears	What will it feel like when God wipes every tear away?

Read each passage slowly, twice. Sit with the reflection question for five minutes before moving on. This is a conversation with God about your pain — take your time. For deeper study, read the corresponding article in our **Suffering & Sovereignty** series at [savagemercies.com](http://savagemercies.com).

SAVAGE MERCIES

# You're Not Suffering Alone

---

This reading guide is part of our **Suffering & Sovereignty** series — 12 articles exploring what the Bible actually says about pain, loss, and the God who entered into both.

Every article is free. Every resource is free. Because theology for real life shouldn't cost you anything except your time and your honesty before God.

---

Read the full series:

**[savagemercies.com](https://savagemercies.com)**

Theology for Real Life

This guide contains Amazon affiliate links. As an Amazon Associate, Savage Mercies earns from qualifying purchases. This doesn't affect our recommendations — we only recommend books we've read, studied, and believe will genuinely help you.