

# Suffering

TRANSFORMING  
OUR PAIN

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# How to Use This Study Guide

FIVE PERSONAL OR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

**SESSION 1:** *Befriending Our Pain*

**SESSION 2:** *Mourning Our Losses*

**SESSION 3:** *Choosing Joy*

**SESSION 4:** *Suffering in Christ*

**SESSION 5:** *Dying Fruitfully*

*This guide is designed to be used easily by individuals or by a group.*

**AS AN INDIVIDUAL** Set aside some quiet time to read through each section of the guide. Underline or jot down (in the margins or in a journal) any thoughts that strike you as particularly important for you. Choose one or two of the suggested reflection questions and write down your thoughts.

**AS A GROUP** Whether you are meeting in person or over the internet, *feel free to adapt the following general guidelines to your specific setting and participants' needs.*

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**Gather** » Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves.

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**Read** » Ask the participants to read the material being covered before you gather (perhaps using the suggestions for individuals given above). Now, invite each member to share what struck them as most important in the text.

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**Discuss and pray** » Encourage participants to choose a question or prompt from the text that speaks to them. Allow time for participants to share their responses with the group, and to pray about them, if desired.

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**Finish** » At the end of each session, ask participants to share something they learned from the session. Close with prayer.

# INTRODUCTION

**H**ave you noticed how the frame we put around a painting can change how we see the picture? I once had a landscape painting with a heavy, dark frame. The landscape featured contrasts between deep shadows and bright areas of color. Not caring for the frame, I searched out a frame shop. In considering various samples, I discovered that colors in the frame made similar colors in the painting stand out. By selecting a light-colored frame, I saw light-struck areas of the picture I'd not noticed before.

Suffering is a universal human experience. It comes in ten thousand forms—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The pain of suffering causes some to question the very existence of God and compels others to seek a closer relationship with our Divine Healer. Henri Nouwen understood that we have the power to choose how we will respond to the suffering that comes our way in life:

...we do have a choice, not so much in regard to the circumstances of our life, but in regard to the way we respond to these circumstances. Two people can be victims of the same accident. For the one, it becomes the source of resentment; for the other, the source of gratitude....Some people become bitter as they grow old. Others grow old joyfully. That does not mean that the life of those who become bitter was harder than the life of those who became joyful. It means that different choices were made, inner choices, choices of the heart.<sup>1</sup>

If we were to ask each of the accident victims why they feel resentment or gratitude, we would likely hear them describe their experiences quite differently. One might speak of the unfairness of the accident or of how his injuries deprive him of a normal life, feeding his jealousy of those who are unaccountably luckier. The other might describe how the difficulties of her injuries challenge her to find inner strength she didn't know she

had, how her pain has opened her to compassion toward others who are hurting, or how grateful she is for the love and care of family, friends, and medical staff.

Each of us places some kind of frame around our personal experience of suffering. One frame may highlight the darkness of the picture, while another frame allows light and beauty to shine through. Nouwen tells us that we can choose a life-giving frame, and he calls this choice a form of “conversion.”

Henri learned something about converting our perspectives by observing how Jesus responds to people’s questions in the gospels. Jesus rarely answers a question on the same terms it is asked. The Pharisees bring him a woman caught in adultery and say, “The law of Moses says to stone her; what do you say?” Jesus turns their question back on them, replying in essence: “Which of you is sinless, that you may condemn the life of another sinner?” (John 8:1-11). His reply reveals that the question is rooted in human misunderstanding. As Henri puts it:

Jesus answers from above to questions raised from below....  
He answers from a place far beyond the powers of the  
world. His answers come from his most intimate commu-  
nion with God.<sup>2</sup>

The more we can choose a frame “from above” for our suffering, the more light we discover in our pain. The experiences of our lives, according to Nouwen, are a constant invitation to seek the meaning of our lives in God. Here is how he relates this to suffering:

The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it. The great secret of the spiritual life, the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity.<sup>3</sup>

We taste how Henri invites us to convert our perspective as he describes one of his own most intense forms of suffering: loneliness. “The more I think about loneliness,” he writes, “the more I think that the wound of loneliness is like the Grand Canyon—a deep incision in the surface of our existence which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding....The Christian way of life does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift.”<sup>4</sup> The image of the Grand Canyon offers a new frame—one that invites us to see the immense depths within our solitary being, the beauty of interior vistas to explore, and the amazing possibilities of self-discovery. As we explore in this booklet the theme of suffering and how pain can be transformed, we will return frequently to the matter of how we frame our experience. The more we discover a God’s-eye view “from above,” the more meaning we find in both our joy and suffering.

**HENRI NOUWEN** was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed on page 32, all of which are available at [www.henrinouwen.org](http://www.henrinouwen.org).

# Befriending Our Pain

*“The first response, then, to our brokenness is to face it squarely and befriend it. This may seem quite unnatural. Our first, most spontaneous response to pain and suffering is to avoid it, to keep it at arm’s length; to ignore, circumvent, or deny it. Suffering—be it physical, mental, or emotional—is almost always experienced as an unwelcome intrusion into our lives, something that should not be there. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see anything positive in suffering; it must be avoided at all costs.*

*When this is, indeed, our spontaneous attitude toward our brokenness, it is no surprise that befriending it seems, at first, masochistic. Still, my own pain in life has taught me that the first step to healing is not a step away from the pain but a step toward it. When brokenness is, in fact, just as intimate a part of our being as...blessedness, we have to dare to overcome our fear and become familiar with it.”<sup>25</sup>*

HENRI NOUWEN IS POINTING HERE TO ONE OF THE GREAT PARADOXES OF HUMAN SUFFERING. It is by entering our pain that we find our exit from it. Avoidance and denial only prolong the suffering, like untended wounds that fester. Suppressed pain spills out sideways in distorted ways. Accepting and entering our pain is the necessary first step toward its healing.

Of course, stepping toward and into our pain is never easy. Henri acknowledges this when he writes,

You have been wounded in many ways. The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you will discover how deep your wounds are. You will be tempted to become discouraged because under every wound you uncover you will

find others. Your search for true healing will be a suffering search. Many tears still need to be shed.

But do not be afraid. The simple fact that you are more aware of your wounds shows that you have sufficient strength to face them.<sup>6</sup>

It is natural to feel anxious as we face our inner landscape. Yet do not forget that Henri came to see the great wound of his loneliness as an abyss filled with inexhaustible beauty and self-discovery. There are profound and lovely gifts to be found in the depths of our being, because we are made in the image of God. However deeply buried or tarnished, the precious beauty of our soul is very much alive within the One “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But it takes courage to descend into the abyss, and we should not hesitate to ask for help in doing so. The Spirit places us in faithful community where we are called to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Nouwen encourages us not to be afraid, pointing out that greater awareness of our wounds is itself a sign of inner strength. Were we too weak to cope with our pains, we would not have the courage to recognize them. “The great challenge,” Henri suggests, “is *living* your wounds through instead of *thinking* them through....The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your hurts to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them....But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart. Then you can live them through and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.”<sup>7</sup>

Here Henri gives us a new frame to place around our experience of pain. It has been said that the longest journey we will ever make is from the head to the heart. Rational analysis of our wounds can take us only so far. The heart takes us deeper. Our heart connects us to God through the heart of Christ, our healer. It is when we begin to live through our wounds in Christ that we come to know the transformation of pain.

## For Reflection

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1. What relational wounds am I most aware of in my life? How much emotional “space” do they take up daily? How do I pray about these wounds?
2. What makes it hard to step toward my pain? What do I fear about “excavating” it?
3. What do I learn about myself from the pain that I face squarely?

## For Action

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*Draw a symbolic image of the Grand Canyon in cross-section (like steps going down to the river, then back up the other side). Identify one important loss or hurt in your life. Imagine walking with Jesus down into that wound. What learning, growth, or other beauty do you find as you explore this particular canyon together? Write words capturing these gifts on the “steps” of your diagram, and take time to offer thanks to God.*



NOUWEN OFFERS A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF HOW WE CAN COMFORT AND CALM OUR INNER WOUNDS, when he writes:

Think of each wound as you would of a child who has been hurt by a friend. As long as that child is ranting and raving, trying to get back at the friend, one wound leads to another. But when the child can experience the consoling embrace of a parent, she or he can live through the pain, return to the friend, forgive, and build up a new relationship. Be gentle with yourself and let your heart be your loving parent as you live your wounds through.<sup>8</sup>

We tend to think of our heart as the seat of human emotion, but the heart is a much larger reality than feelings alone. Ancient Jews and Christians



saw the heart as the central organ of spiritual perception. Thus the heart was the primary dimension of human life connecting us with God. This is why Henri can assure us that our hearts are greater than our wounds.

Henri's way of seeing each wound as a hurt child reminds me of the wisdom of another writer, Flora Wuellner. In several of her books on healing, Flora encourages us to picture each unhealed wound as an "inner child," hiding painful feelings under problematic behaviors. She reflects on the story of Jesus with blind Bartimaeus, who shouts after Jesus for mercy even when people try to silence him. (See Mark 10:46-52.) "Each of us has an inner Bartimaeus crying out," she writes, "often unheard or ignored by those around us and sometimes even by ourselves." Flora notes that "what we call our negative sides—anger, anxiety, complaining, criticizing, procrastinating, controlling, and so on—are usually deep inner cries for help." Perhaps they come from childhood traumas that we were told to get over, rise above, forgive and forget. "But wounds do not just go away," she continues. "If unhealed, they cry like abandoned children in the dark, forgotten places within us. The only way they can make their presence felt is through our negative attitudes, our addictive escapes, our symptoms of pain."<sup>9</sup>

Wuellner offers her readers guided meditations on inner healing. It may be useful to see how she guides such a meditation, to help us expand on Henri's image. This meditation emerges from Flora's reflection on the story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus. She sets it in the context of Jesus' question to the blind man—a question each of us may fruitfully ponder.

*Jesus stood still and said... "What do you want me to do for you?"* (Mark 10:51).

- Make your body comfortable. Take a few slow, deep breaths, then breathe naturally.
- God's tenderness surrounds you. Rest in that deep strength. You are safely enfolded in loving attention. God hears your deepest needs, hurts, and longings. Breathe in God's love.
- Talk to God about some inner fault or compulsion that makes life