

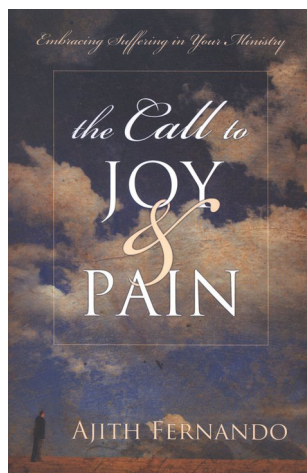
The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry

By Ajith Fernando

Crossway Books, 2007. 192 Pages.

Reviewed by Stephen Strange

Stephen Strange (pseudonym) has served as a church planter with his family for eight years in East Asia, Central Asia, and (currently) South Asia. Though his primary focus is on Muslims, the Lord used Stephen to start a church-planting movement among Han Chinese. Stephen is married to a South Asian and has three children. Among the most influential authors in Stephen's life and ministry are Roland Allen, Dallas Willard, N.T. Wright, and Jackson Wu.



“Suffering? What’s that?”

My initial call to serve as a cross-cultural church planter came through my experiences on short term trips to Mexico as a high schooler. We built houses for the poor. One of the most impactful aspects of this experience was coming face to face with a lifestyle that was totally foreign to me. Growing up at a mega church in a relatively new upper middle-class suburb in America, my trips to Mexico were some of my first experiences with what I considered “suffering.” As a cross-cultural church planter among the unreached, how would I be able to guide others through the inevitable persecution they would face for the sake of the Gospel?

The longer I live in other cultures, the more I realize the ways in which my own faith has been influenced by my home culture, both good and bad. Some of what we often consider “blessings” actually turn out to be negative influences in an overseas ministry context, including individualism, consumerism, comfort, prosperity, success, safety and security. Many of those I am close to even read the Scriptures through these kinds of cultural lenses and find a hermeneutic that leaves little room for suffering.

A Trustworthy Guide to Navigate a Theology of Suffering

Dr. Ajith Fernando is a trustworthy guide for anyone wishing to navigate the rough waters, messiness, suffering, and pain that often accompany life in ministry among the unreached. As someone my family and I know personally, we can testify that this man is the “real deal.” He is a prolific author who actually lives the things he writes. *The Call to Joy and Pain* is no exception. As someone who has lived most of his life in Sri Lanka, he has seen civil war, persecution, fallen pastors, and many other hardships, as well as the joys of ministry.

At the same time, he has also received education in the West and writes and speaks to a sizable Western audience, so he understands both Eastern and Western cultures. His gracious demeanor and humility shine through his writings as he gently invites the reader to look in the Scriptures and into their own life in a new way.

Dr. Ajith Fernando, through a simple and straightforward understanding of Scripture and honest reflection on his own life, leads us to a place where we conclude that “for us suffering is not a big deal” (loc. 1710). This is by no means belittling pain, but rather an acknowledgement of the promises of God in the midst of our pain. After stating that in Christ suffering is not a big deal, he goes on to write, “The big deal is always our relationship of love with God through Christ. If suffering helps us get closer to Jesus and be more effective in his service, then we will

welcome it with joy, as Paul did” (loc. 1741). Obviously, there are serious cases of abuse and trauma that may take a lot of effort and time to work through with counseling and loving Christian community. At the same time, Dr. Fernando’s larger point is that we approach these issues with the help of the Holy Spirit and great assurances from the Scriptures.

Joy and Pain is not Either/Or

Fernando points out early in the book that joy and pain often appear together in Scripture (e.g., Colossians 1:24–29). Many of us are quick to critique the prosperity gospel, and rightly so. Many of us are much slower to recognize and confront discouragement in our own lives. Yet aren’t there some fundamentally similar ideas at work in both the prosperity gospel and in our perceived right to avoid suffering? Fernando helps us shift our perspective. Quoting E. Stanley Jones (missionary to India), he writes, “Don’t bear trouble, use it. Take whatever happens – justice and injustice, pleasure and pain, compliment and criticism – take it up into the purpose of your life and make something out of it. Turn it into testimony” (loc. 80). We ought to recognize and experience joy in the midst of pain. Fernando’s exhortation is especially pertinent to cross-cultural ministers sent from more affluent contexts.

In considering Fernando’s exhortations, a few questions arise related to cross-cultural ministry. First, within our teams and organization, can the things we face rightly be categorized as suffering? Often, we have found ourselves and colleagues “enduring suffering” when we have to deal with inadequate educational and social options for our kids, fruits and vegetables that aren’t fresh, or weather that is too hot or too cold. We can even find ourselves expressing these things as suffering in front of people in general and believers specifically that are facing imprisonment, torture, and death. What kind of understanding might they walk away with based on these interactions? Likewise, being overly concerned with security issues can inadvertently model fear and unwillingness to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

Secondly, we sometimes encourage one another to “be real” and express these disappointments and pains rather than ignoring them, hiding them, or pretending they are not there. Fernando reminds us that the Psalms and several other places in Scripture use lament to express disappointment, both individually and corporately. This ought to be a practice for us as believers today; yet, this does not preclude having joy in the Lord. Likewise, just because a person is happy does not necessarily mean they are ignoring pain. Fernando explains that “the happiest people in the world are not those who have no suffering – they are those who are not afraid of suffering” (loc. 535). He reminds us that we must not get stuck in our suffering. It is not enough *not* to dwell on our hurts and pains. We must move forward in the power of the Spirit through the pain, even finding joy in it as in Habakkuk 3:17-18 (loc. 185). This mindset serves as a powerful testimony to those we are trying to reach with the Gospel.

Hard Things to Let Go of

As the book progresses, Dr. Fernando continues to put his finger on some core issues behind our struggle with hardship. For example, he points out the need to let go of our desire for control. He says, “the most important thing that we surrender is our own self – our desire to control our lives” (loc. 403). We can view the suffering of our lives as part of a bigger adventure that God has for us. He brings good out of every situation.

Another underlying issue he addresses is our desire to feel fulfilled in our calling and ministry. In Sri Lanka, many leaders who go abroad for training and return home to serve bring with them something of the radical individualism of affluent countries (loc. 513). They no longer have a stomach for what needs to be done, instead they seek opportunities where they can be fairly compensated in areas of their giftedness. They eventually end up leaving the country and taking jobs in places where there already is a strong church. We have discovered the same truths in our ministry as pioneer church planters. Our calling often requires years

of investment with little or no fruit, so some of us turn to other kinds of ministries that have more tangible results, that we find more fulfilling, and that more directly tap in to our giftings and skill sets. Fernando advocates finding where the need is the greatest and submitting to a role that will have the greatest impact for the kingdom.

Keys to a Biblical Perspective of Suffering

There are many reasons to find joy in hardship. It brings us closer to Christ and shapes us to look more like Him. Fernando says, “there is a depth of oneness with Christ that we can experience only through suffering” (loc. 554). It also has a way of purifying our motives and is often a means the Lord uses to advance the Gospel. Through suffering we can also identify with others who are suffering.

The book can be summarized by three paradoxical truths in the Christian life: suffering will yield real, abundant life (Mark 8:35, loc. 1702); rejection and persecution will be accompanied by acceptance (John 15:20, loc. 1702); and, we face tribulation with the confidence that Christ has already overcome the world and therefore we have peace (John 16:33, loc. 1702).

Although I really have no criticisms of the book, there is one caution I would submit to readers. As we look for the hand of God in the midst of suffering and trust His plan, it can lead to a passivity in our personal walk and ministries. Certainly, there must be times when God calls us to confront evil and suffering in a very active way, whether in our own lives or the lives of others. The deeper joy found in Christ can provide tremendous strength that propels action. Readers may have benefited from a theology of suffering that provides a bit more development in the area of finding joy not only in the passive acceptance of hardship, but also in the active opposition to sin and evil.

This book is a must-read for those doing ministry among frontier peoples. As is often said, there is a reason why the unreached are still

unreached more than two thousand years after the coming of Christ. They are in the hardest places and those sent from affluent contexts to minister to the unreached face a steep learning curve when it comes to suffering. Yet, we carry the message of a suffering servant-king. For this fundamental reason, Fernando's perspectives laid out in this book ought to be required reading for every frontier cross-cultural minister of the gospel.

Counting the Cost

The themes of this book can be illustrated by an experience I had in a country hostile to the gospel. After several months of studying the Scriptures weekly with a group of students, I was ready to invite them to put their faith in Christ. As I was preparing to lead the students in "the sinner's prayer," a local believer in the room suddenly stopped me and read a passage on counting the cost of following Jesus. The energy in the room evaporated and the smiles on their faces became looks of concern. Someone broke the silence with a question about the implications of this gospel decision and, before I knew it, side conversations broke out and I had lost control of the room. They were discussing what would happen to their family, their education, and their future if they committed to Christ. I had been so close! Yet, one student finally spoke up and shared his conviction that it would be worth it. He was the only one who committed his life to Christ that day, eventually walking through all the suffering that the others had feared. Nonetheless, he had tremendous joy and led others to Christ, baptizing them and forming them into reproducing churches.

This story reminds us that those from affluent contexts can easily preach an incomplete gospel, devoid of the call to suffering. At the same time, those that we are ministering to can quickly make these connections when confronted with Scripture's simple teachings on suffering. An honest presentation of the Gospel should always include a counting of the cost. The story also shows us what we know to be true throughout church history; the church, like the student in the story above, is often

most fruitful when she is equipped with a robust theology of suffering.

This book gives a roadmap for how to find joy in the midst of pain and to keep ourselves from being drowned by anxiety, depression, and fear over the circumstances we find ourselves in. We can give thanks for the hardships we face, acknowledging with joy that they can be used by God to draw us closer to Him.

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