

# Raise Your Ebenezer



DR. TED GOSHORN

## Praise for *Raise Your Ebenezer*

“Ted Goshorn gives the reader a new perspective on how to deal with suffering. His field guide theme comes with a deep theological approach. It is a gift to all those who are working through their own difficult circumstances. Moreover, Ted’s book centers one in hope that, as followers of Jesus, the best is always yet to come!”

—Bishop David Graves  
Resident Bishop, Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference and  
Kentucky/Central Appalachian Missionary  
The United Methodist Church

“Goshorn invites us into his journey with and through suffering with a level of vulnerability that is all too rare among faith leaders today. Pushing past simplistic answers and theological clichés, *Raise Your Ebenezer* offers a compelling field guide for what it means to cultivate hope, resilience, and authenticity through the most difficult seasons of life.”

—Ryan Bonfiglio, PhD  
Associate Professor in the Practice of Old Testament  
Executive Director, The Candler Foundry

“Goshorn shares his own personal journey with suffering while calling upon scripture, historical events from Christianity, and hymns to invoke the narrative of how each one of us struggles in this life. His words don’t present definitive answers, but instead allow us to wonder, and question, and discover more around the age-old question of ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ This book frames those narratives in a lens that is absent of simple platitudes and filled with reminders that in the midst of it all we are not alone, for God and community are always with us.”

—Reverend Sara Pugh Montgomery  
Pastor in The United Methodist Church

RAISE YOUR  
EBENEZER

A Field Guide to Suffering



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Dr. Ted Goshorn



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*To my family,  
Dana, Jackson, and Carter,  
whose love so reflects God's love*

*and*

*To Graham Snyder,  
whose "southern drawl" suggestion to write  
through my suffering inspired this book.*

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## Beginning the Journey

*Come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.  
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.*

*Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come;  
and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.  
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;  
he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

*O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.*

—Robert Robinson, 1758

## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

*“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah and named it Ebenezer, for he said, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’”*

—1 Samuel 7:12

JUST OUTSIDE OF ALBUQUERQUE SITS the Petroglyphs National Monument. My family and I came to see drawings made by inhabitants of the land long ago. At this point, we had yet to see drawings but were enjoying the sunshine and the terrific views of Albuquerque. As we turned down a path, we saw many little stone monuments. They were small, maybe six inches to a foot high, and definitely human-made: small stones stacked one on top of the other or, as my younger son, Carter, exclaimed, *ebenezers!*

We might be mostly familiar with the word *ebenezer* from Charles Dickens’s classic, *A Christmas Carol*. Part of Dickens’s brilliance in that book is naming the main character Ebenezer. That word, in Hebrew, means “stone of help.” And isn’t Ebenezer Scrooge a stone of help?

In the book of 1 Samuel, the prophet Samuel stacks stones on top of each other and calls it an *ebenezer*—a marker of the hope he had in God. There, in Albuquerque, we saw the same: stones stacked one on top of the other into small monuments. And they were all around us.

Carter got down and started to make his own ebenezer from some loose rocks. Jackson, my older, joined in. When they were done, my wife, Dana, and I asked them what they were remembering with their stones of help, their ebenezers. Carter said, “Papa the Great,” what he called Dana’s grandfather; a man whom we’d just buried the day before. Jackson said, “Quincy,” the name we had picked out for a baby we lost to a miscarriage.

Truly, they understood what it is to erect an ebenezer; a stone of help.

Life for my family these last few months has been marked by reasons to lose hope. As I wrote these pages, I waited for health insurance to approve life-giving medical treatment while suffering with physical ailments like chronic fatigue, unusual and severe aches and pains, unrelenting nausea, and congestion. For the last many months, I suffered greatly in my body, eventually landing me in the hospital in December 2023, with what I called my infection sandwich: two different strains of antibiotic-resistant sinusitis, bronchitis, pneumonia, respiratory syncytial virus, and mononucleosis, all simultaneously. Excellent medical care after I left the hospital resulted in detecting a condition I have had all my life: primary immunodeficiency. My immune system simply does not function well, and is even weaker now than it’s ever been before. Life since I left the hospital has felt like the pandemic all over again: I wear a mask wherever I go, I avoid crowds, and I work from home, per my doctor’s orders. I am often isolated.

Such suffering in body affects the mind and the spirit. It has been easy to lose hope. I wrestled with my faith, wrestled with my calling as a pastor, wrestled with the church I served; I wrestled, like Jacob before me, mightily with God. And as I write, I am not yet done with my wrestling. I have good days, where I see hope, and I have hard days, where I find myself mostly despairing. The ups and downs of this season of life have left me weary and worn.

Jackson has also suffered mightily. While I was just starting to get out of bed again, he came down with mono. This disease kept him in bed for three months, struggling with severe headaches and the

symptoms they created. In the end, we had to unenroll him from school, causing him to start eighth grade all over again through a homeschool program. He misses his friends and the band program he adores. Like me, he has undergone his own emotional and spiritual journey, one he continues to walk.

The rest of the family sojourned with me and Jackson. We have experienced the ups and downs, the wrestling, the despair, the hope, together. God has joined us together, and like a body, what one part feels, every part feels. At times, this reality engenders tremendous support; at other times, all of us suffering simultaneously leaves us weary, worn, and hopeless.

Then, just as we saw light at the end of the tunnel, we all felt like we'd been kicked while we were down. The church I served grew impatient with my recovery and voted to seek a new senior pastor. In The United Methodist Church, this rarely happens; yet, it happened to me. I found myself without a job, suddenly and cruelly. The night after I got the news, Carter was inconsolable, wailing for hours. He spoke for all of us as we each grieved mightily.

Our bouts with illness, the waiting for treatment to begin, and all the questions left us feeling unstable and traumatized, wondering what new crisis life would bring next. The church's decision added significantly to that feeling, ushering us further into the darkness that so often characterizes suffering.

It's fair to say that, for all four of us, these past several months have been the hardest season of our lives. In a four-month period, two of us lost our health, I lost my job, Jackson lost his school, and our lives felt turned upside down. Our suffering was and is great.

What do we do in moments like this? As a family, we ask ourselves that question many times. Dana and I sometimes stare at each other, asking such a question, often without answer. What do any of us do in moments like this, where suffering seems to take hold and not let go? Where we might know in our heads that this will not be forever, but our hearts and souls have yet to realize such wonderful knowledge?

Perhaps you can relate to times of suffering like this, whether in the past or in your present reality. If so, this book is for you. I must confess, it is also for me. Churches I served often comment to me how helpful my sermons and teachings around suffering are. Now, I must turn back to my own teachings, back to the scriptures on which they are based, to rediscover my faith afresh and anew. I invite you along this journey with me, hoping that as I think about how to handle my own suffering, I can help you find the way forward with your suffering.

The still, small, voice of God, suggesting I write this book as a means of therapy, came through a southern drawl on the other end of my phone. One of my dearest friends suggested this project to me after listening to how I have been suffering. Friendships, as I have found, are vital during periods of such suffering. The despair and hardship of suffering lies to us, telling us to isolate, that no one cares, that we best not trouble others with our issues. At times, I believed such lies, only to find my friends and family rally around me yet again, after I am sure I must have exhausted their sympathies.

Friendship is one answer to the question “What do we do in moments like this?” And as I worked on this book, I found several more answers. Some days I cling to a faith that says God will provide, healing and health will prevail, God will use my suffering to God’s glory, and that one day, I will look back on this season of life and see how God redeemed my suffering to help others and to make me stronger. One day.

But that day is not today. Nor will it be tomorrow. So what do we, a people of faith, do while we wait for this future? And then, what about when the future seems uncertain, a faraway surety outside of our grasp? At times during my illness, and at times as I watched Jackson suffer, I wondered about our mortality. When we suffer such that death becomes a watchword, looking out from the ramparts of our lives, glimpsing scenes of death coming like a marauding army, what do we, as a people of faith, do?

Throughout this book, I endeavor to answer that question. God made us to be doers. Consider how often scripture admonishes us

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to be things like “doers, not hearers” of the word (James 1:22). For the majority of our lives, we work, we contribute, we do. When suffering impedes our ability to do, we suffer all the more because we struggle to live out who God made us to be. Our identities, our sense of self, connects deeply with our labor, from laundry to preaching, from financial planning to dishes, from bedtime routines to statistical analyses, from staff supervision to pruning bushes. God made us to do that labor, and God made us to be doers, so when we cannot do what we normally do, what do we do?

It turns out God has given us things to do even when suffering. As I suffer, I find that when I care for others, I experience care myself. Even when I make a pastoral care call and we never talk about me, I yet experience a certain mystical care for myself. Caring for others is one thing I have found to do. I have also, oddly, found joy in pruning. Our yard needs serious attention. As I have energy and need a physical outlet, I prune. Seeing completed work has its own satisfaction, but my mind wanders, as I listen to jazz or the alt rock of my high school years, to how I am pruning my own life. Getting sick and having to take so much time away from the things I did brings into focus what matters and what does not. So, in pruning, I find joy and I hear God speak.

And, I must confess, I have grown rather obsessive about my New York Times crossword scoring. As I write, I am on a ninety-six-day streak of completing the daily crossword, and also realizing with some panic that I have not yet completed today's! Although the hour grows late, I must, because I have found great joy in completing these crosswords. Then, I also complete the mini crossword, the Wordle, and another new word search game because Jackson, Dana, and two of our dearest friends share our scores every day.

Before I got sick, it seemed such a small thing. Now, it feels like everything.

For finding joy, seeking connection, focusing on what truly matters in life, caring for others—these things take on new and urgent importance when we cannot do as we once did. There are still other

things we can do, and as we walk the journey of this book together, we will examine all this and more.

My hope, and my prayer, is that this book will be a practical manual for you, whether for your own suffering or as you care for a loved one who is suffering. That's why I have subtitled the book as a field guide through the land of suffering, a land we can rightly characterize as the wilderness. Throughout scripture, the wilderness is the place of chaos, dismay, despair, fear—suffering. We must all walk through the wilderness from time to time, journeying just as Christ did when tempted in the desert and when walking the path to Golgotha.

As we depart on this journey, we look first at how to trust God. This does not presume that we already trust God, nor that we will at the end of the chapter, but it forms a framework to understand all that will come throughout this book. After all, God is good, and yet we are experiencing something other than good. How can we trust that God will provide, prevail, and persevere for us? Parts One through Three cannot make sense without first attending to our relationship with God, whether we currently trust God, are struggling to trust God, or don't trust God at all.

Having looked at our divine-human relationship, this field guide then moves further into the land of suffering by looking at what to expect in Part 1: Getting Acquainted. When we look out at the wilderness, what do we see? And when we have seen, how do we understand? The ancients thought of the wilderness as chaos in part because strange creatures lived there. When we suffer, we encounter all sorts of strange things. How do we understand what we find? How can we make sense of the fact that God allowed this to happen? Did God cause this to happen? Did my own sin cause this to happen? These are the kinds of questions we encounter in the wilderness.

Once oriented to the wilderness of suffering, we then look for strategies for survival in Part 2: Survival Strategies. Like any good field guide, we need to know how to survive in this wilderness, such as hoisting food up a tree to keep it from bears, or relying on friends. When suffering, we need to know what to do now in a very practi-

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cal sense. How do we survive suffering that can seem overwhelming, a suffering that can seem to threaten to tear down the lives we have built? One of my doctors recently said that my life had been “turned upside down.” She is right! Life turned upside down is disorienting. The wilderness is disorienting. How do we survive such disorientation? The bulk of the chapters ahead give us answers to that question, helping us survive.

We focus on the here and now also because, too often, spiritual advice we might hear during suffering focuses on the future. Friends, pastors, and others in our lives, in trying to be helpful, may tell us simply to wait, knowing that God will restore. They may say things like, “God works all things together for good,” or “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” Sometimes, I even quote these things to myself! Such hopes, as I am sure you are aware, quickly die when suffering enters our lives. They die because they are shallow; scripture pulled out of context. Our faith, and indeed God, demands better.

While we journey through the land of suffering, these clichés are insufficient. God has given us tools to handle our suffering now, while we wait. We are empowered, as we will see, to not only survive but even thrive in the land of suffering, finding ourselves refined. We do indeed have hope in the future, for Christ is triumphant. But while we are on the journey through the wilderness, we need to know how to survive so we can reach that moment in the future where we will know, as the old hymn says, victory in Jesus. Otherwise, suffering can seem to threaten to consume, trapping us forever in the wilderness.

Only once we have learned these survival skills do we turn toward hope in the future, the content of Part 3: Discovering Hope. While sojourning in the wilderness, using the tools God has given us, learning to understand what we encounter and survive its challenges, how do we look toward the future with hope? Where do we find hope? These chapters address this crucial question after we have learned to recognize the wilderness, accept our limitations, and discover how God has empowered us to trek through this foreign, weary, and dark land.

After each chapter, you'll see a page dedicated to "Field Notes." This is for your use, to react and process as you read and journey through the land of suffering. I designed this book to be a practical guide, wanting you as the reader to find it not only a helpful guide for today, but hopefully a guide for the future. Each Field Note contains a prompt to address. Feel free to adjust or ignore that prompt as you see fit, recording your response here in this book. These pages are designed for your use, with the prompts merely a guide to begin to react and reflect after reading each chapter.

By the time you reach the conclusion, I pray you have a renewed sense of hope—hope based in knowing how to survive and perhaps even thrive during this time of suffering. I am finding my way, too, and as I write, as I labor on this book, I am finding that God is not only teaching me how to survive, but even how to thrive, for God has empowered me, and you, too, to walk through this land of suffering.

Those ebenezers at the Petroglyphs National Monument stand out in our collective memory as a family. In the middle of what can only be described as a wilderness, even with the orderly city of Albuquerque clearly visible nearby, we raised our stones of help. Perhaps that is the greatest thing we can do in the wilderness: defy the voices in our heads that tell us to despair, tell us to quit, tell us there is no future, by erecting a stone of help—a monument to the God who inspires our faith that the suffering will not have the final word. When we erect such ebenezers, we defiantly say to the forces of suffering, "God's not done with me yet!"

So let us cry with the poet and preacher Robert Robinson, "Here I raise mine ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come; and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home ... come, thou Fount of every blessing, tune [our] heart[s] to sing thy praise," even in this wilderness.



### Field Notes

Describe the suffering you know today. What led you to read this book? What do you hope to gain? Perhaps put your answers in a written prayer to God.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# Dr. Ted Goshorn

Ted Goshorn lives, moves, and has his being in the mountains of Western North Carolina. There, with his wife, Dana, his sons Jackson and Carter, and his dog, Quill, they have found a deep sense of home after wandering through the land of suffering. Ted will soon serve as a financial advisor, working with individuals and communities to faithfully steward the resources entrusted to them.

Ordained in The United Methodist Church, Ted holds a Doctor of Ministry from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, along with various other degrees from Emory, James Madison University, and Berry College. He has inspired collaborations across religious, nonprofit, and government agencies; led efforts to pay off more than \$1 million in medical debt; and fostered children and youth support programs. For his effort with at-risk youth, the Emory University Alumni Association recognized Ted as one of its 40 Under Forty in 2021. Ted wrote this book while in the land of suffering and prays it gives you hope as you seek God on your journey.

