

## *Endorsements*

Many are the afflictions of the righteous. The Lord delivers us through them all. And as sweet as the promises are that God will deliver us, going through our afflictions and not getting out of them can challenge our confidence in His goodness, wisdom, and sovereignty. In this gentle-spirited book, Dr. Tom Ascol pastorally calls us to hope in God in this vale of tears. With the precision of a theologian and the devotion of a brother, Ascol's biblical meditations and prayerful reflections remind the struggling Christian that we can be sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

**Dr. E. D. Burns**

Missionary in Southeast Asia; Professor of Spirituality  
and Missiology, Asia Biblical Theological Seminary

After the cancer diagnosis of his sister Joy, brother Tom Ascol wrote weekly letters for one year to encourage Joy's family and friends with the precious promises of God's Word. Over twenty years later, we have the rare privilege of reading these tender, Christ-centered, and moving letters for our own Bible memorization and devotional lives—each of which breathe with realism in the crucible of suffering alongside optimism that the world cannot know. Above all, Joy's life shows that those who live and die in the Lord are truly blessed (Phil. 1:21; Rev. 14:13). I trust that the Lord will richly bless these letters for the comfort, encouragement, and endurance of many of His children in the midst of suffering as well as for stirring up holy jealousy in the hearts of the unsaved for the portion that belongs to God's people, which in turn, may press them on to seek and find salvation for their own souls by the Spirit's grace.

**Dr. Joel R. Beeke**

Chancellor and Professor of Systematic Theology and  
Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary;  
Pastor of Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan

This is holy ground. We are invited to a family pilgrimage of affirming the goodness of God, the power of His Word, and the vital reality of prayer as they experienced together the road to death of Joy—beloved wife, mother, sister, daughter. This journey, now more than two decades ago, was fueled with strength and energy in each next step by familial Scripture memory, exposition of the context of the memory verse, and a prayer based on the verse. We learn of the inception of the killing cancer, the agreement to journey together in the context of revealed truth, experiences week by week of Joy’s brave and trusting journey, the decline, the death, and the victory of such a death. We read the sermon Tom Ascol preached at the funeral. We can see that in Christ death is stingless. This was not conceived as an academic work or projected as a volume of devotions for the public. It is grippingly existential in the most spiritually and edifyingly provocative way. Their journey becomes ours and elicits the unerring exclamation, “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

**Dr. Tom J. Nettles**

Retired Professor of Historical Theology,  
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Every family needs this book. *Suffering with Joy* will give you the scriptures that you and your loved ones need when walking through heart-rending trials—and especially with those who are dying. When sorrows run deep, you need a deeper well of wisdom to carry you through. This book plunges you into that well. Help your kids prepare for the trials ahead with the scriptures Tom prepared for his sister. Memorize the flagship verses that head each chapter with your family. This book is a shepherd’s staff written by a true shepherd. As I read these pages, it was plain to me that the author himself has been comforted by the same means through which he comforts others in their time of need.

**Scott T. Brown**

Pastor at Hope Baptist Church;  
President of “Church and Family Life”

In this volume, developed from a time of deep suffering within his own extended family, Tom Ascol has to the world given a gift—practical spiritual disciplines to help the reader lay hold of divine resources during life’s trials. His own reflections on Scripture and suggested prayers, as well as apt quotes from our church forefathers, demonstrate how we can better draw near to Christ in times of fear and pain.

Both a person suffering and one ministering to a sufferer will find page after page of deep wisdom and comfort drawn from the only source where one may find them—the Bible. I wish I had had *Suffering with Joy* on hand in the past to give to friends who were walking through difficult times, but I’m grateful I’ll be able to bless them with it in the future.

**Megan Basham**

Daily Wire Culture Reporter;  
Author of *Shepherds for Sale*

This book is one of the most edifying and encouraging books I have ever read. It is a compilation of forty-four letters (plus funeral sermon) that Tom Ascol wrote to the entire family during his sister Joy Dyer’s trial with and death from cancer. Providing Scripture memory from some of Joy’s favorite verses in each letter, Tom expounded each Scripture to encourage Joy, her husband Dean, and the rest of the family. The result is Christ-centered, theologically sound, and edifying application of the gospel to the joys and trials of Joy’s journey each step along her way to death, which was but her entrance into glory with Christ. It could be used as a devotional reading even beyond those who struggle with illness. It could be edifying to the pastor how to instruct and encourage his people in their multicolored trials. Tom’s integration of sound interpretation of these wonderful verses with practical application of their truth to Joy and the family is an example of how a Christian should always think as well as when facing life’s upheavals. Give this book to those in all kinds of trial. Give this book to the aging Christian who faces his/her mortality. Give this book to all kinds of Christians as an example of living a Christ-centered life by faith each day. They will thank you. But first, read it for yourself, and you will want to share it with those you care for. Thank you, Tom!

**Dr. Fred Malone**

Pastor Emeritus, First Baptist Church,  
Clinton, Louisiana

Suffering has been our constant companion since the Fall. It is a great equalizer that eventually comes calling at the door of every family and is never a welcome guest. In this helpful book, Tom Ascol serves as companion, model, and teacher as he helps his loved ones, and us, navigate the deep waters of suffering and loss. This book is a timeless treasure to be shared with those inside the church as a guide to suffering well, and with those outside the church as a guide to knowing the one who is our only source of true and lasting hope.

**Dr. Voddie Baucham**  
Founding Dean, ACU;  
Founding Faculty, The Institute of Public Theology;  
Author of *Fault Lines*

SUFFERING  
WITH JOY

*Letters on Tragedy,  
Loss, and Hope*





SUFFERING  
WITH JOY

*Letters on Tragedy,  
Loss, and Hope*



THOMAS K. ASCOL

*Foreword By*  
BILL ASCOL



**FOUNDERS**  
MINISTRIES

*Suffering with Joy*  
*Letters on Tragedy, Loss, and Hope*

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*To my brother-in-law,*  
EDWARD DEAN DYER JR.,  
*faithful husband, father, and friend.*



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## *Foreword*

The small volume you hold in your hand is at once very personal to our family and at the same time a very powerful collection of eternal truths from God's Word. It is designed to help anyone who is suffering to be filled with the "joy and peace in believing" of which the Scriptures speak. The occasion for the writing of these forty-four letters that comprise this book was the tragic discovery that Joy Ann (Ascol) Dyer, one of my older sisters, had developed a deadly and aggressive (and incurable) type of brain cancer. The genesis of this book was the pastoral desire of my younger brother, Dr. Tom Ascol, to minister to Joy, her husband, Dean, their son, Greg, and indeed our entire family as we each struggled in our own way to make sense of and find hope in the very difficult providence the Lord had brought to us.

In life and in death, as long as she had mental awareness, Joy was able to demonstrate that she was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and an ambassador of His goodness, assuring anyone she encountered, "Joy Dyer is going to be all right." It was her purposeful intent to glorify God in her suffering and encourage everyone who loved her and was concerned for her well-being that she served a good God and a faithful Savior.

Tom is one of the most faithful and capable communicators of the gospel of Jesus Christ whom I am privileged to know. His life as a follower of Jesus Christ offers to any serious observer a

compelling pattern of what being a disciple of the Lord should look like. As a husband for more than four decades, a father of six, and a grandfather of eighteen (and counting) grandchildren, to watch him interact with his family presents a magnificent collage of the gospel on display. Whether he is speaking (i.e., lecturing, preaching, or counseling) or writing, he powerfully communicates the Truth as it is found in Jesus Christ.

For many reasons I will not take time to outline, Tom is uniquely gifted to write this book. He understands the reality of suffering in a fallen world and the great comfort found in a biblical understanding that it is God's world as set forth in God's Word. He handles the Scriptures with the balance stated by the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "In the world you will have tribulation [i.e., "you will be squeezed"]. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 ESV). For those who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, the message in this book will offer hope in the midst of suffering. For those reading this book who have not yet come to know Jesus Christ in this way, the gospel-saturated pages will faithfully point you to the only One who in this life is able to make sense out of suffering and offer peace in the midst of it. The pages of this book set forth many provocations to the reader to remember the past mercies of God, the present promises of His Word, and the hope of future grace in the days ahead.

This book can be read all the way through to experience the healing balm of copious amounts of hope for living life in a fallen world, or it can be read one letter at a time as a daily devotional for a steady diet of God's gracious hope. Or the pace can be adjusted to read a letter, meditate upon the message, and only move on to the next letter after memorizing the corresponding

Scripture verse. The nature of the content of each letter will reward the reader for returning time and again to be reminded of glorious truths.

I am grateful that in God's kind providence I was nurtured in a family filled with examples of what real Christianity looks like. Even though some of these family members have left the land of the dying and entered the land of the living and are now present with the Lord, I still miss them and look forward to seeing them again one day by God's grace. In the meantime, I pray the reader of this little volume will be reminded of (or become aware of for the first time) the joy and peace that can be found by believing in the God who is "too wise to be mistaken and too good to be unkind." By the way, Joy Dyer is now in heaven, and she is doing all right.

*Too Wise to Be Mistaken, Too Good to Be Unkind*

(The Wisdom and Goodness of God, Exod. 34:6)

God shall alone the refuge be,  
And comfort of my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken, He,  
Too good to be unkind.

In all His holy, sovereign will,  
He is, I daily find,  
Too wise to be mistaken, still,  
Too good to be unkind.

When I the tempter's rage endure,  
'Tis God supports my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken, sure,  
Too good to be unkind.

When sore afflictions on me lie,  
He is (though I am blind),  
Too wise to be mistaken, yea,  
Too good to be unkind.

What though I can't His goings see,  
Nor all His footsteps find?  
Too wise to be mistaken, He,  
Too good to be unkind.

Hereafter He will make me know,  
And I shall surely find,  
He was too wise to err, and O,  
Too good to be unkind.

— Samuel Medley

Pastor Bill Ascol  
Senior Pastor, Bethel Baptist Church, Owasso, OK



## *Preface*

On January 22, 2000, my sister, Joy Dyer, tried to pay for a purchase at a department store in Bryan, Texas, in her usual way. But for some strange reason, she could not make her hand write out a check. That was the first sign that something sinister was attacking her body. Three days later she was in surgery having a tumor removed from her brain. The pathologist who examined the biopsy said the cells looked malignant but were unfamiliar to him. He sent the samples to micropathologists in Austin for a definitive diagnosis. One week later we were told that Joy had a “high grade glioblastoma.”

The doctors said there was no medical hope that she could be cured and Joy probably had six months to a year to live. That news rocked our family. She and her husband, Dean, had built a wonderful life in Bryan where they were both heavily involved in their church and community. Their only child, Greg, was happily married with one young daughter and another on the way. Joy was fifty-eight.

January 28, 2001—almost one year later to the day—cancer took Joy’s life. She was the third of the six children born to our parents. I am the youngest, born sixteen years after Joy. Like all my siblings, Joy was smart, successful, and godly. After working as an elementary school teacher and principal for many years, she became the executive director of Elementary Education of the Bryan Independent School District. Because of the way

that she and Dean lived their lives, there was no way her cancer would remain a private matter.

The letters in this book were born out of a deep love for Joy and Dean by friends and family. We desired to walk with them through this hard journey and support them however we could. We called them “Joy Letters.” Originally they were sent out only to family and a few friends. Eventually these letters were being passed around so widely that it became impossible to keep track of them. After Joy’s death, there was some encouragement to publish them. Although I considered the idea, I did not have the heart to pursue it. Dean took the letters and had them bound to give away to some friends and family.

Over the past twenty-plus years, I have occasionally been asked about the letters and if I would ever consider publishing them. Until now it has always seemed too personal to take that step. It was a hard year. Joy suffered greatly. But she suffered well. It was both heartbreaking and faith building to watch. The ways she and Dean trusted Christ through those months demonstrated that He is a faithful Savior and His grace is enough to sustain us in our deepest trials.

My hope is that these letters, originally written to support my sister through her suffering, will provide some comfort and encouragement to other fellow-sufferers who are walking a hard path. I did not publish these letters without the blessing of Dean and Greg. They gave it without hesitation. When I inquired about it, Dean said, “Greg and I both feel if it would do anything to improve our world or benefit someone it would be fine. We also ask, ‘What would Joy say?’ We think she would approve.”

I think she would too.

# *Introduction*

**D**ear Family:

Last week [March 2000] I enjoyed visiting with Joy and Dean while Donna, the kids, and I were in Bryan. It was encouraging to see how well she is doing. She passed the half-way mark of her radiation treatments on Thursday, March 9. She is scheduled to have her last treatment on Friday, March 31. Then she will have three weeks before she begins chemotherapy treatments.

I know that you are praying for Joy and Dean. In times of sickness, it is great to have the love and support of family. All of us wish that there were more we could do for Joy during this time. But there really is nothing more important than praying to the One who has all power. What a comfort to know that our Lord does all things well and that Joy, like all of us, is securely in His hands.

Last Saturday, Donna and I were able to be together with most of the siblings for a few hours in Bryan. We agreed to do something over the next several months that will not only be an expression of support for Joy but will also be good for each of us. Various Scriptures have become especially meaningful to Joy over the past few weeks in her fight against cancer. We agreed to work on memorizing several of these verses as a family.

Joy will give me a list of various Scriptures that I will compile with others and mail out, one or two at a time on a weekly basis. We will work on memorizing them from Monday through Sunday then start with a new verse on the next Monday. Donna and I plan to work on these together and to include the children. Each week we will have the added incentive of knowing that we are working on the very same verses Joy and Dean are memorizing during her treatments. And we will be doing it together with the rest of the family.

If memorizing Scripture seems a little intimidating to you, think of all the things you have already committed to memory (names, dates, TV schedules, sports statistics, phone numbers, addresses, etc.). Fortunately, memorizing is not a “zero sum” game. That is, you don’t have just 100 gigabytes of memory and once you fill it you can’t add anything else. Rather, your memory works like a muscle—the more you use it, the more useful it becomes. It can be developed, stretched, and strengthened.

I estimate that an average of fifteen minutes a day will be sufficient to commit a verse a week to memory. Most of us can easily find that much time in our daily schedules to commit to Scripture memory. As with most other things in our lives, if it is important enough to us, we will do it.

I am sending this letter to everyone who was at Dean’s and Joy’s house and to those whom they “signed up.” If you don’t want to be included in future mailings, let me know. If there are other family members (or friends) who do want to be included, I will happily send the verses out to them as well. Again, let me know (and make sure I have proper mailing information).

Let me offer a few suggestions as we embark on this joint project:

1. Use the Scripture that you are memorizing as a basis for praying for Joy and Dean. If a promise is given, turn it into a plea. If something is stated about God's character (like His kindness, mercy, gentleness, love, strength, etc.), use that in your prayer. If the verse says something about our need (forgiveness, weakness, fear, doubt, guilt, etc.), make that a part of your prayer not only for Joy and Dean but for yourself and the rest of us as well.
2. When you talk to Joy or Dean, mention one of the verses that you have committed to memory. The more we think about Scripture the more God gives us insight into it. This will happen with those verses that we memorize. Share your thoughts with Joy and Dean (and the rest of us). Spiritual conversation can be so encouraging, yet often we find it easier to talk about almost anything other than the Word of God. Now, we will know that others have been thinking about the same Scriptures we have, so why not talk about it?
3. Be diligent. Make this a matter of real commitment. If you fail to keep up one week, don't beat yourself up over it. Simply repent and start over the next week. Joy jokingly said that committing to memorize Scripture together might bring an end to all future family reunions because of the fear of having some smart-aleck brother (or sister or niece or nephew) come up to you and ask, "So what does Jeremiah 33:3 say?" There should be no pressure to participate in this. Rather, we should see it as

an opportunity. An opportunity to hide the very words of God in our hearts; to stand with Joy and Dean as they do the same; and to do something very significant together as a family, even though we are separated by many miles.

4. Use the Scriptures you are working on in conversations with family members whom you see regularly. Help each other memorize them. Encourage each other. We spend so much time talking about less important things; this will provide an easy and natural way to talk about more important matters.
5. I will send out the Scripture verses in the New King James Version (NKJV). You may well prefer to memorize them in a different translation. Simply take a three-by-five card and write out the verse in the particular translation you use. If you don't have a preference, you may find the NKJV helpful. It is similar enough to the old King James that those of us who grew up using the KJV will find it familiar, yet it is not encumbered with the sixteenth-century style of speaking.

The thought of memorizing Scripture may be very unappealing and even intimidating to you. Maybe it dredges up painful memories of failed geography tests in grade school! Perhaps you use the excuse (like I often do) that you simply have a bad memory. Consider this: If I offered to pay you \$10,000 for every verse of Scripture that you memorized over the next nine months, do you think your ability to memorize would improve? Mine would too.

Proverbs 2:1–5 says,

My son, if you receive my words,  
And *treasure my commands within you*,  
So that you incline your ear to wisdom,  
And apply your heart to understanding;  
Yes, if you cry out for discernment,  
And lift up your voice for understanding,  
If you seek her as silver,  
And search for her as for hidden treasures;  
Then you will understand the fear of the LORD,  
And find the knowledge of God. (emphasis added)

David said of the commandments and testimonies of the Lord, “More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold” and “sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:10). What if each of us really desired God’s Word more than gold?

Look for your first verse next week.



### *A PRAYER*

Father, help us to receive Your words and to regard them as a valuable treasure; to desire them more than we desire money. As we commit to memorize different verses of Scripture, we are conscious of our weakness and backwardness in this area, so please give us power to stick with it. As we hide Your words in our hearts, give us also a burning desire to understand what we memorize; to discern what is true so that we may

*SUFFERING WITH JOY*

believe it; to recognize false thoughts and ideas that we may reject them. And enable us to understand what it means to fear You in the right way. Amen.





## *Call to Me*

“Call to Me, and I will answer you,  
and show you great and mighty things,  
which you do not know.”

*Jeremiah 33:3*

Jeremiah 33:3 is a verse many churches teach children during their younger years. For any age, it is an appropriate verse to commit to memory because it is a reminder of God’s willingness to hear the prayers of His people.

Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet” because he lived through and was deeply affected by the most tragic days in the history of Judah. He was a man who suffered a great deal. He did not want to be a prophet in the first place, but God drafted him to that responsibility. Nobody believed his message (37:2). He was mocked and ridiculed for his sermons, charged with treason when he declared God’s word to the people; he was publicly humiliated by being put in stocks (similar to the pillory that was used in the Wild West of the 1800s); and he was imprisoned in a miserable dungeon.

In fact, it was while in prison that he heard God speak these words of our memory verse. Don't you think Jeremiah was probably tempted to doubt God at this point in his life? I am sure he must have already been praying—calling out to God. Wouldn't you if you were unjustly thrown into a stinking prison simply for doing what God told you to do?

This promise was made not just to Jeremiah but to all the people of God. At the time that it was given, Judah was under attack by the powerful and barbaric King Nebuchadnezzar and his vast Babylonian army. The destruction of Jerusalem was imminent. Even the most optimistic Jew had probably given up any hope for victory. Yet in that desperate situation, God makes this incredible invitation (“Call to Me”) and attaches a huge promise to it (“I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know”).

Faith is taking God at His word and acting on it. It takes faith to call on God and anticipate great and mighty things from Him when the enemies are knocking down your door. A key to benefiting from this verse, I believe, is the last phrase, “which you do not know.” Often, we limit our desires (and therefore our prayers to God) to those things which we do know. We ask Him for what *we think* is best. But God is determined to give to His children that which *really is* best. When we pray, we must always remember that His thoughts and ways are far above our own (see Isa. 55:8–9). The Jews of Jeremiah's day would have considered it a great and mighty thing if God had immediately and miraculously destroyed the Babylonian army and spared the destruction of Jerusalem. But God had things far better—much greater and mightier—in mind for them, things which they did not know.

Read the rest of Jeremiah chapter 33 to see what the “great and mighty things” are which God promises to give to those who call on Him. What you will find is the promise of forgiveness and renewed joy and gladness, all of which is because of Jesus Christ. Though His earthly name is not mentioned, His life and ministry are described in verses 14–18. He will save His people completely and eternally. No matter how devastating the Babylonian attack may be, God has great and mighty things—things which we do not yet fully comprehend—in store for everyone who, with faith in Jesus Christ, call out to Him.



*A PRAYER*

Our Father in heaven,  
grant us faith to call to You  
no matter what our circumstances.  
Help us to believe that You will show us  
great and mighty things in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.